

火刑戦旗を 掲げよ!

2

かすがまる
KASUGAMARU



MFマックス

Kakei Senki Wo Kakageyo!

— Fanning the Flames of War! —

- Volume 2 -

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[Infinite Novel Translations]





◆エレオノーラ

◆ベルトラン

◆ヤルツコ

◆アクセリ・アーネル

◆ダニエル・ハッキネン

◆クスター

◆オイヴァ・オタラ

◆エルヴィ

◆マルコ

◆ラウリ

火刑戦旗を
掲げよ!
主な登場人物

「貴女は僕に試された。」

それをお怒りになりますか?」

それは質問のようできて質問ではなかった。

いわば確認だった。

パウリーナはそれがわかっていたから、

ただ首を横に振ることに応じた。

マルコもそれがわかっていたから、

ただ首を縦に振ってきた。

◆パウリーナ

◆ヴィルマ・カントラ



天境山脈

幻魔森

西龍河

東龍河

死灰砂漠

サルマント伯爵領

アパリシオ伯爵領

カルリオン伯爵領

行禍原

ペテリウス伯爵領

●キコ村

ヘルレヴィ伯爵領

イグナシオ伯爵領

ティヘリナ伯爵領

ロンカイネン侯爵領

セルバンテス侯爵領

バランディン侯爵領

マルヤランタ侯爵領

●王都

アハマニエミ侯爵領

●帝都

紫雲海

ユリハルシラ侯爵領

バルヴィラ伯爵領

エスカランテ侯爵領

サンタマリア
侯爵領

カリサルミ伯爵領

塵夢森

ベラスケス伯爵領

デラクルス伯爵領

エテラマキ伯爵領

聖杯島

エベリア帝国

アスリア王国



Chapter 19

A carriage travels along the road

The girl displayed a practiced sleeping posture within the carriage, which shook with bumping sounds.

Even though she is wearing a dress, notwithstanding being a simple one, she has a cushion between one of her knees and has fixed her body's posture by leaning against another one. Holding a stuffed toy of a hippopotamus, battered from long use, in her arm, the ribbon, tied on her head, is pink. Its knot is starting to fall apart due to the clumsy way of binding it.

(The grown me and Paulina-sama... though she is boldly sleeping on this shaky travel.)

There is a woman, sitting on the opposing seat, gazing at the girl's appearance without moving.

Her gallant, beautiful figure looks like that of a story's prince. Her name is Wilma Kantola. Her age is around 17~18? Her undulating blonde hair has a single braid at the side of her head. Her emerald pupils are burning with a mighty will. The elegant outfit, that gives the impression of being a knight's training equipment, although she isn't disguising as man, has leather reinforcements applied all over. In the sword belt at her hips hangs a short sword. Its pommel has been arranged as a golden seal.

There are no female knights within the military of the Asuria Kingdom. It's also the same regarding soldiers. Women exclusively work as rear support being labelled as female civilians in military employ. In spite of that, it's a fact that she is armed with a sword. The reason is the special characteristic of the mission she has been entrusted with. Her special duty assumes that she must fight just like a knight, even if she is young and a woman.

Her job title is "Maid officer."

It is something that had been established for the sake of protecting the royal women. The lord Wilma has to protect, is the adorable person sleeping in front of her.

Although having the rank of being the youngest child, she is the Third Princess Paulina, who owns the right to legitimately succeed the crown. With her age being 12 years old, she is old enough to even be wedded next year. Viewing the amber, gentle hair, one can feel the warmth of the earth in it. The skin, which doesn't know about make-up, is squishy and soft. *Please teach me the contents of the dream you are watching as you are chewing and wriggling.* The small body with its short arms and feet is an embodiment of purity. Wilma's cheeks slackened unintentionally and she quietly fixed the lap blanket on the girl.

Caringly, carefully, making sure to not disturb her peaceful sleeper's breath...

Once she straightened her posture in the seat, a disgust slowly gushed forth from within her belly. Grasping the pommel of her short sword with her female hands, she suppresses the shaking, even if only a bit, and stands with her feet apart stepping firmly.

The faces of the cruel people of the capital appeared within Wilma's mind. *If it's my own body suffering distress, let me show you how I can bear with it, but it's Paulina who has been exposed to physical and mental absurdities. It's at a level that I can't even count the number of abuses thrown at her.*

According to their words, it's her level of dim-wittedness, unfitting of the royal family. Far from studying how to be a good ruler, she is clumsy at music, dancing, etiquette and just about everything else. She can't master those. Just calligraphy is barely average? Drawings of horses and cattle depict monsters resulting in one doubting their own eyes. No, are the contents in her head to be doubted? Anyway, she is a worthless existence.

According to their words, she is similar to a stain due to stealing the blood of the royal family. Although she was carried out by her mother as the daughter of the former Earl Hiltoora, who broke his knee before the invasion by the Eberia Empire, we hear that her mother didn't protect her fidelity. It might be because the former Earl is known for his shamelessness or it might be because she spread her legs for people from Eberia. Isn't it a fact that the king kept that mother and Paulina away from the royal villa?

According to their words, she has an ordinary appearance that doesn't even appear to be that of the royal family. She has hair like filthy mud. Drooping eyes as if still half asleep. A baby figure, that doesn't seem like that of a woman at all. Not just her contents, but even her outer appearance is that of a child having grown up without a change. Even dresses and decorations don't suit her. Like that, even the appearance of the family's

maid feels more graceful.

In a volume that can't be heard by the person herself, however circulating those with great frequency... it's malice, which soaked into the air of the royal capital. Escaping from the royal palace, it was still impossible to cut off that stench even in the previous royal villa. Driven away from the brilliant society, Paulina simply passed her childish, unchanging days without fighting against it.

Her back teeth are grating with a grinding sound. The grasped pommel is trembling.

However, feebly releasing those, Wilma exhales painfully.

Only the sound of the wheels turning around is reverberating. In the small world within the carriage, there's only the two of them, without anyone else cutting in. There's not even a court lady serving Paulina at present. Speaking of a court lady for a young princess, the noble's daughters will likely aspire and compete for that position, but not a single one approached Paulina's side.

Those, who get close to the third princess, are glared at by the first princess.

She, First Princess Eleonora, is the most valuable woman in Asuria Kingdom. With the king currently being on his sickbed, she is the woman standing at the top of the national sovereignty. Her becoming the next queen is a settled matter known by everyone. The prince consort, who will become her husband, is a former holy knight and she has formed a relation between woman and man with him. Her blighted love with the brave is known, but you might say that she's currently at a position to reach for everything. You won't find a woman living at her level of happiness, even if you searched the entire continent... Wilma believes so.

That Eleonora hates Paulina. Moreover, she is stating that without hiding it. Paulina is a shameful person. Paulina is the disgrace of the royal family. Otherwise, why would all nobles be able to be cruel towards Paulina?

Furthermore, the current Wilma would be impossible without her existence. Meeting with Paulina, wearing a sword at her side as maid and even those agonizing days... all of it is because of a case caused by Eleonora.

Eleonora established the special duty task called maid officer in order to protect royal women. Within the many governmental affairs dealing and conforming with precepts and customs, this royal edict stood out and it was a good opportunity, similar to a

divine revelation, for Wilma. In Asuria Kingdom, if one desires the talents of a military man with a female body, she has to put in great efforts aiming for that.

Harvesting the fruits of those efforts, it had been decided that Wilma would serve at Paulina's side day and night. However, that was already filled with evil intention. The selection of Wilma as maid officer in itself was scorn towards Paulina.

Even while being meagre, the Kantola family is a Knight household possessing territory and a mansion. They have the responsibility to provide military forces to their ruling noble. Wilma believed this matter to be the pride of a military family and didn't think in her wildest dreams that it would be something like a shame. She didn't believe that at all. Mingling with the lesser knights and their attendants, she valued her days of training martial arts.

However, once she compared herself with the other maid officers, she felt depressed at once. Except Wilma all other maid officers were descendants of high-ranking nobles. Moreover they have been granted consecrated, treasured swords by the church. That wasn't the case for Wilma.

The daughter of a rural Knight, you can find anywhere, will likely suffice as the maid officer of the third princess, who hasn't even a court lady, or such... Wilma, who heard such malicious gossiping riding upon the winds, was tormented. It was intolerable since even her appearance was used as ridicule against Paulina.

Look at it when you line up those two, either of them can be regarded as the maid... for the sake of wanting to say such thing, Wilma, who has such characteristics, was chosen. It was no one else but Eleonora, who did that.

She grasps her hand tightly.

Her body had mastered all kinds of martial arts. She had forged herself. Without even mentioning a short sword, a long sword, a bow, a spear... she could even fight empty-handed. She also made an oath to give up her life and body for her own lord.

But, how about reality?

The maid officer is no more than a single decoration adorning a royal woman. Even if she has to fight, that would be a vicious, political affair. Being struck by the poisoned arrows called malicious gossiping, being cut by the cold sword called sarcasm and being burned by the wicked flame called scorn, Wilma has no means to protect her

lord from those.

(Although she lived together with brave-sama during the war, surpassed the sadness of bereavement and has supporters at a level, where they smashed the nasty plot of an evil man, why does she have to do such a heartless thing...?) (Wilma)

Wilma remembered the portrait of the brave, which decorated her family's home. His appearance is that of a hero from illustrated stories. Full of kindness and bravery, he is a holy person, who strove for justice at all costs. For the church he is already the written legend of a saint. For a knight, it is a dream to fight at his side.

I wonder if we wouldn't have fallen into such situation, if the brave was still alive...
Wilma got close to the shading cloth of the window and lifted it. She looked outside while squinting.

The landscape of the north was spreading out.

She perceives the shadow of the Heaven's Boundary Mountain Range stretching out lengthily and largely as the wall of mankind's world. Beyond that there are huge ice fields. Those are filled with cold and miasma which are the enemies of human activity. Considering such things, Wilma even feels somewhat suffocated by the spring's light blue sky. Without something like shields of protection against the sky, it's no more than the wind simply blowing.

"Oh? Did something happen?"

The voice came along the sound of the horses' hooves hitting the ground. A blue overcoat was vividly fluttering in the wind.

"Do you need a break?"

Wilma felt as if the smile of the mounted soldier held a somewhat daring component. However, with his battle aptitude being reliable, his pre-eminence in martial arts is transmitted by his strength and agility.

Captain Akseli Anel of the feudal army.

Speaking of the elites of the Helrevi feudal army, she is aware of the 1000 man strong cavalry unit, and their commanding officer is this man. Wilma knows that she can't ridicule him because he is a soldier of a supply area in the rear. That's because she has

heard that he once cooperated with the Hakkinen guard corps. He demonstrated his valour as commanding officer even during the subjugation of the mounted bandits.

In such situation... of the third princess visiting the Helrevi Earldom, he is accompanying the carriage as commander of the escorting 100 cavalry and 100 soldiers. And, to begin with, he was also the ringleader, who changed this involuntary visit into something more difficult.

(Baron Hakkinen, why had this soldier been recommended...?) (Wilma)

Wilma ended up scowling at him unintentionally. But the other party isn't concerned about it at all.

"It will be alright. We will arrive at our destination before evening. There's still going to be plenty of time for resting." (Akseli)

Wilma, who had a mood that it wouldn't be alright in the least, firmly grabbed the window frame. *Did he try to encourage me with that?* Skilfully bringing his horse near, Akseli puts his ears close. Even admirably considering the ways of courtesy, he doesn't try to peek into the carriage, even by accident. Wilma somehow doesn't feel amused by that after all.

The circumstances are unfavourable.

The cold-weather damage, which continues at every place in the central part of the northern region, the provocative conduct of the Eberia Empire's army at the front and the king's illness lasting for more than a season. The enthusiasm for restoration after the "Festival of the Holy Flame" has cooled down and public anxiety is continuing to spread in the Asuria Kingdom.

Although it was an idea of the First Princess Eleonora, who was unhappy about that, the three princesses are doing a tour of visitations of the kingdom's northern territories. The princesses are going around the Earldom Salmant and the Earldom Peterius in the Northwest, which are adjoined by the Plain of Wandering Calamity, and the Earldom Helrevi in the Northeast. The plan is to encourage the officers and men at the front while extensively soothing the people.

The First Princess Eleonora's popularity is immense, alongside the legend of the brave. The Second Princess Margareta has also been widely idolized by the people for promoting relief projects for poor people and her beauty. Compared to those, there were

nothing but unfavorable comparisons for the Third Princess Paulina. She hasn't yet done anything as she's still young. Lacking gorgeous beauty, she is an existence that has simply been driven out of the royal villa. Or being those "unfavorable comparisons" might be her role... once she thinks that, it becomes unbearable for Wilma.

However, it was decided to change this plan because of Paulina's bad physical condition. Without heading for the front-lines, she just has to do the anticipated visit at Earldom Helrevi and then to return to the capital. Rather than becoming a burden, she will go home by walking properly in the back. Such was her treatment.

Even so, that's fine, Wilma judged.

Rather than Paulina being looked down upon while the public attention is on her and even if she isn't receiving a treatment as princess for example, I wanted to finish this quickly and return to the royal villa. I won't even mind the abuse for running away. I just wanted to wrap her up in a warm, gentle space. I wanted her to spend a lot of time like that, even if it's only a bit.

However, such a prayer of Wilma was smashed by a single feudal army's captain.

"Her physical condition also looks like it has recovered. How about it? She finally came to these northern extremity at great pains. Not just the territory's capital, but also every city... or do you want to try going to places such as the remote regions instead? Do you actually want to confirm the state of the villages in the territory's remote regions, strongly hit by cold-weather damage, with your own eyes? This humble me will gladly guide you." (Akseli)

Earl Mathias Helrevi, who faced having lost at drawing lots, recommends him. Once Paulina showed her agreement in the form of a nod, there wasn't any means left for Wilma to change it anymore.

Thus it has been decided for the carriage to turn over the wheels towards the remote regions in the Northeast while being protected by the feudal army. Our only rescue is that the road's maintenance is strangely thorough, huh? And yet it is shaking and shaking. Currently Paulina is sleeping. Currently Wilma is glaring at the soldier with the name of Akseli.

"...In the first place, where to are we headed?" (Wilma)

In order to not wake the sleeping girl, Wilma reluctantly brings her face close to the

ear of the soldier and asks.

“Where is this carriage heading?” (Wilma)

Once she conveyed it like that with a voice that became low due to her anger, that man answers without even particularly concealing his joyous expression on his face that looked surprised.

“It’s a village called Kikomaru.” (Akseli)

“Didn’t I tell you?” he mutters with the conviction that he had told her. Wilma can’t deny it. She was upset at the time they decided to head for the remote regions, thus her memory isn’t definite.

“What is... What are you saying is there?” (Wilma)

Wilma regrets it by saying 「Damn it!」. Though those were words said due to her backlashing, she remembered the reason for heading there. *If I remember correctly it’s about measures against the cold-weather damage. I would be truly pathetic as maid officer and would be made fun of, if I didn’t even listen to that.*

However, the soldier, clad in a blue overcoat, smiled without a tinge of contempt.

“There lies a mystery. For me it was a hard-to-get treasure, but for Miss Princess... well...” (Akseli)

He parts with a smile at the end of his words. *The words left behind are just like a riddle.* Wilma separated from the window frame, obviously befuddled. *It’s probably because it was something unforeseen?* She ended up losing her strength somehow.

The carriage proceeds onward.

At the time, the party arrived at Kikomaru, the daylight was still high and it was warm.

Chapter 20

Cooling down and the likes is unreasonable

“Hiii, hoo, hiii, hoo”

Although she is unsteadily staggering on her feet, which looked tiny and plump, she is trying to tread on a special white cloth. The thing, which at the beginning bulged from under the cloth, is slowly and gradually being flattened under their influence. Moreover, in proportion to the stepping, it seems to be stabilizing as well.

“Oof, pheew... 3 more times.”

Another cloth spread on the floor... that one is an ordinary, clean cloth, but... carrying out a landing, Paulina is expressing a perfect smile. Even while Wilma believes it to be lovely, it's inevitable for her to worry about the other two onlookers besides her.

“Oh dear! How magnificent. I believed the soil to be the ally of the feet sunk into it, but...”

While somehow disrespect is seeping through his expressions, words and deeds, that soldier has a way of repeatedly praising her. It's Akseli. *Although it's fine for you to stand upright, declining to sit down even when told so, what is this about folding your arms while in front of the princess*, Wilma thinks.

And, there's one more.

“That's amazing. Looking at the lustre of that white cloth, it appears to be the same as if it had been kneaded for a long time. My expectations are rising.”

There's a boy here demonstrating dignified manners even while sitting. His tone is very sincere, without something like ridicule, but his sparkling blue eyes below the black hair are nice and his long, slender and well-proportioned limbs are great. Wilma can't calm down feeling somewhat strangely overpowered.

(The village headman's son, Marko, he was called? I've heard he is 13 years old, but...)
(Wilma)

Looking at him with a glance, Wilma thinks *he's weird after all. A 13 years old boy of this generation hasn't such manners. Those at his age are insecure, failing to develop a strong will, be it the one facing outward or the inner one.* All of the children Wilma observed were like that. Genuinely awkward and painful to look at with their liveliness.

How about him then? The style of calmness of this boy called Marko isn't a trivial matter. At the astounding event of a princess appearing in the village, he managed everything as the leading character outside, due to the adults becoming restless.

Showing a place to plant their tents to the soldiers of the escort, arranging for water and fodder from the villagers and proposing the optimal guidance, considering the length of their stay, to Wilma... doing everything smoothly in advance, it doesn't feel like some kind of pretense either. *He honours Paulina by serving her with politeness. It's a reception without any mistakes to point out.*

Is he really 13 years old?

Wilma prefers excelling characters without regard to their social status. Since she is a fledgling herself, she has no intention to discriminate by things like age either. However, that boy's bizarreness was something difficult to accept.

(This boy, what is he hiding? What is he looking at...?) (Wilma)

For Wilma, who was continuously exposed to the blade of morality called malice in the swamp of poison called capital, this kind of unknown in itself should be something she had to be cautious against. If she can sort out to some degree what they are thinking and what they are intending, she is able to cope with it. Even if she can't defend against it, she will be somehow able to circumvent it before it happens. However, with this level of an unknown opponent, that won't work. At the time he wanted to do something, it will be the end, if even one of his actions are fatal for Paulina.

Talking about that Paulina, having folded the cloth, which was flattened evenly, she is treading on the next hill. Gripping the hem of her dress, she is once again stepping on it and stretching it out full of spirit. She is doing it with more vigour than usual because of the praises of the spectators, huh?

What she is making is a food called "Refined Noodles." (T/N: 練麺 = Neri men... google

the kanji and you will find pictures, seems to be some kind of science to make those noodles)

As something she was able to often eat at the Hiltoora household from her mother's side, its ingredients are light wheat flour, salt and water. Mixing those together, and letting mature for nearly an hour, it is refined by kneading just to let it mature once again and then it is cut thinly and gets boiled. As something that suits broth, is good mixed with eggs and tastes well with fish sauce applied over it, it appears to be popular as food of the masses in the Eberia Empire. Wilma only learned of that after becoming a maid officer.

There are various kinds of ways to make it. In Paulina's case, the part, which is usually kneaded with hands, is being stepped on with the feet. Her powerlessness has been compensated by her body's weight. The ingredients are wrapped up in a special white cloth, rolled up and stepped on after wiping the bare feet clean. At the time Wilma saw the actual procedure for the first time, she was also surprised in a two-fold meaning.

First, the act of stepping on things, that can be eaten, with the feet is lacking common sense. It goes against the teachings of the church. No matter how cleanly you wash them, feet are still feet. The act of stepping on food is equated as filthy deed.

Next is the special white cloth used at the time of stepping on the ingredients. It's a fabric called Quinn, which is considered to be the highest class among all clothes. The white, glittering, lustrous material... a dress entirely made out of Quinn is the dream of every woman. It's even at the level that daughters of great nobles don't possess several of them.

That treasured fabric, which was bestowed to her as a dress by the king, who is her father, is being used by Paulina as a cooking utensil for a in-itself special cooking method. Even currently she is stepping firmly on it while feeling gleeful.

Is this the childishness of a youth? Or is there something else behind that?

Wilma can't make that judgement as of yet. *I just have to hide this conduct from society. There's already nothing more than sorrow, without any fresh charm, considering how the surroundings will take it, but the white cloth can't be stolen. It's a treasured item for the sake of making a delicious dish and for Paulina to trample on in joy. It won't do if I can't protect her. Be it the church or the nobles... even if it was the king for example, I won't allow them to be this much of a nuisance. I don't want to.*

“The footwork of princess-sama is only admirable, but hmm, I can’t imagine the completed work at all.”

“Ah, it will be cut after this. And then it will be boiled until it’s done. You might be close while imagining it as a soup that has substance. Look forward to it.”

However, these are the circumstances. Wilma doesn’t know what kind of facial expression she might be currently showing. In the tent built for the princess use, where no one was planned to enter either, a soldier and a boy are waiting while nodding to one another with a “Uh huh, uh huh.” Paulina is making dinner by freely showing the method that should be hidden.

Thanks to that, the discussion about refined noodles between Paulina and the boy ended up getting excited.

During his tour, the boy provided various explanations even while not addressing Paulina over-familiarly. Wilma became the mediator of the two and answered that task. That’s only natural as royalty and Paulina abides to it as well. It was considered that everything would proceed without any problems.

But, at the moment the explanation reached the practical method of harvesting wheat, Paulina’s eye colour changed. The traditional measures against cold-weather damage and the method of gradually attempting various cultivations, namely Mekon wheat... as way of capitalizing on its characteristics, refined noodles were able to show their reputation.

Paulina enthusiastically asked questions repeatedly once there was spare time during the tour. What kind of milling? How much water-solubility? How about its sensitivity? How about its firmness? What kind of viscosity is needed?... It was an exchange of straight questions and and prompt answers. While getting concrete confirmation with a rough nasal breathing, Paulina was already at a standstill on the spot, too.

And, currently she is using the pretext 「Food Sampling」 .

“It’s done. With this much stepping at the end, letting it mature will be next.”

With her cheeks dyed pink, Paulina displayed a smile all over her face. The sweat on her forehead is glistening as well. There’s a short moment of rest once you finished the foot-kneading. The ingredients will finish during the time of enjoying one cup of

tea. *Most likely she was able to execute it with satisfaction*, Wilma's cheeks slackened. She shakes in excitement as she muses over the sensation of Paulina's feet. While secretly restraining those thoughts, she folds the cloth.

During that time the soldier and the boy also greatly admired Paulina's ability... although it's only the feet... they gave praises for her strenuous effort of accomplishing the stepping and stretching for a total of 8 times. There already isn't even any time for Wilma to step in there. She is happy once she looks at the boastful Paulina. Although she believes that their intimacy with people sometimes surpasses her social status, Wilma is still a maid officer.

"...Akseli, will you use a raw egg?" (Marko)

"Depends on its freshness." (Akseli)

"In that case it's alright. Let me try testing refined noodles with egg as well. I will go fetch some." (Marko)

I chase the boy, who exits the tent saying "Excuse me for a bit", with my eyes. And I saw the soldier following him with his eyes until he was out of sight as well. I have no proof, but I believe it to be something suspicious. Seeing those looks and seeing the way of talking between the two of them, Wilma surmises that there has to be something... and she feels that it is connected to the bottomlessness of the boy.

"Captain-dono... what kind of relation do you have with him? You are surprisingly close." (Wilma)

Even if it was impolite, that didn't mean I wouldn't ask about it. Thinking back on today's events and watching the exchanges between the two, Wilma's mind has a single suspicion rising to the surface.

Wasn't it the objective to meet up with him?

Coming as far as this remote region in the hinterland of Earldom Helrevi happened because of the suggestion of this soldier. He is the cause. He said that it was something apparent, but as a matter of fact, didn't we come to this village because that strange boy is here? We visited many places seeing all of the village thanks to the tour of the boy, but it can also be said that we could see it today, in one day, because of the boy.

"Rather than meeting at this village, I'm associating with him for several years now,

but... hmmm... if you insist on words to describe our relationship, it will become something quite complicated. There's no doubt about our intimacy though." (Akseli)

After he wrecked his brain with a tensed look on his face, that came flying out of his mouth like lightning.

"Well, if he ordered me to destroy the kingdom, I would likely do that." (Akseli)

Those were words she couldn't comprehend at once. Trembling all over her body due to its significance like an electric shock, Wilma stirred as if snapping. Grasping the sword with her hand, she covers Paulina with her body. *The man in front of me is unarmed, but I'm sure he is concealing steel, if he dares to leak such dangerous words.*

"Your loyalty is almost splendid. But, I'm sad to tell you, it's merely kindergarten military arts for the elder sister to protect her younger sister." (Akseli)

"...Shut up. Kneel down with your hands behind your head. Turn around. Else I will kill you." (Wilma)

"If you kill me, you guys won't survive." (Akseli)

The words of that man are dangerous after all. Wilma searched for presences in the vicinity of the tent with a feeling of her hair standing on end. The sounds of clothes billowing in the wind at dusk, the sounds of the small popping of wood burning in the camp-fires and... the far too many footsteps of the guards all at once. The metallic clanks of swaying sword belts. The sounds of the spears' pommels colliding with pebbles.

We have been surrounded. Their numbers aren't below 20, but not above 50 either, huh?

"Did you guess it? By the way, all of them are members of the feudal army's infantry unit. They are lent soldiers. My 100 cavalry riders are currently away from here. I hear that apparently mounted bandits appeared." (Akseli)

"I-Impossible!" (Wilma)

"Right, it's an impossible story. At this point in time something like mounted bandits shouldn't appear either. But, there is the strict order that the defeat of the mounted bandits takes the highest priority, as long as eyewitness reports crop up. It seems to be something carefully thought over along the journey of the princess-sama, but well,

isn't the safety in the village something unexpected?" (Akseli)

Due to the soldier saying this with a smile and the sharpness of his discernment, Wilma was overpowered and took half a step back. She is able to feel something soft in her back. It's the warm and slender hand of Paulina. *I cannot afford to retreat any more than that...* she puts her deep and low breathing in order.

"Yes, that's fine. As expected of a maid officer." (Akseli)

Wilma's body almost pitched forward due to his far too cheerful, smiling appearance. Her motivation was warded off. Rather than letting her recover her footing, the soldier quickly piled up even more words.

"It's alright. That lot can't attack as long as I'm here. They would be publicly beheaded because of the crime of not protecting the princess from the mounted bandits. That's my role in this. Regrettably there is no reason for them to kill me here. If they kill me, it will result in the infantry unit's commander losing his head instead. In that situation the other party will likely be troubled as well." (Akseli)

Saying that, he picks up a sake cup and drinks some water. *What's this soldier saying...?* Wilma wrecked her brain while being at the same time nervous and spoke of her deductions as if tracking down a gold coin within mud,

"You are... captain-dono is different from that group?" (Wilma)

"Of course. I have absolutely no intention to offer my neck for the kingdom." (Akseli)

And, with a broad smile, he added one more thing,

"If it's on behalf of Marko, well, there might be such work as well." (Akseli)

Something clicked within her.

The mystery called being in the village. A treasure, which is hard to get. This much isn't happening because of him for sure, huh? The unfathomable something I feel from the 13-years old boy called Marko... for the person called Feudal Army Captain Akseli Anel that is even more precious than the kingdom. Isn't it more important than his own life?

"...He is?" (Paulina)

There was a quiet, inquiring voice from the back of Wilma making her dumbfounded.

“Very soon the dough will be cut and boiled, but are you able to eat it together with us?”

In a time of emergency like this. Wilma is trying to have Paulina hold her tongue, and that resulted in her seeing something for the first time. Without being able to see everything even with her eyes open, she still tried to have her eyes open.

Someone, who was Paulina but isn't Paulina, stood there.

That doesn't mean that her appearance changed. There's no particular difference in her being a pure, plain girl. However, it was huge. Something was spreading out more and more. At the same time it was something becoming distant, stronger and stronger. Wilma was aware herself just how much she had misread her lord. She bore a feeling of shame. At the same time a feeling of great joy ignited in her chest.

(Ah... That's how it was? Even I tried to look down on you...?) (Wilma)

Wilma saw the sky. The blue, blue, transparent firmament. If you looked at it from the small window called human ambition, you can assume it to be something worthless, low and very dull when compared to jewels and paintings. As if it is obvious, it is something you can't feel even a shred of something like brilliance, without knowing any value it might have.

But, if you jumped outside society, it is sparkling throughout the entire heaven you can gaze at. It is something incomprehensible by every single human world and thus it has no fetters tying it down. It isn't something tiring of wishing everything and anything well freely at will either.

Paulina stood there... in a calm and collected manner.

“I can eat it.” (Akseli)

The soldier replied with an unchanged attitude. That is capable of surprising Wilma once again. *It is impossible for him to not feel something that should even be called the divinity of Paulina. There's no way that this kind of soldier hasn't seen the embodiment of a person with great talent appearing at this time of emergency. And yet.*

“He went to fetch some eggs, but since it's dark already, he is just returning while being

slightly careful. The hindering pebbles, the twigs, just about everything... he just repels them with his hands.”

That was likely far too close considering it's a prediction.

There were continuous weird sounds besides the tent. Sounds of scraping metal and sounds of something dropping with a thud. Shrieks are mumbled and agitated screams were unnaturally cut off. She hears various sounds of various things in a short time, and then, all sounds vanished. Only one remains, there is only the sound of tent's cloth fluttering in the wind.

Trying to shake her strangely heavy body, Wilma walked outside the tent.

The moon had come out.

In a world, illuminated by its velvety soft light, the corpses of several tens of people were scattered in the vicinity. They had the shapes of soldiers. The ground is slightly reflecting the moonlight darkening it, but since the smell of iron rust is drifting about, it surely must be something worse.

There were kneeling man. Their appearances were diverse. Those, who had the guise of farmers, those, dressed completely in black, and those, with the appearances of merchants... there are also many people sharing the same appearance as the collapsed soldiers. All of them are clad in the dreadfulness of those who make a living out of strife. Conspicuously standing out among them is a man, wearing a green hood. Carrying a formidable long sword in his hand, he is likewise kneeling being the vanguard of these men.

And... there is him.

Being like a heaven-sent child of moonlight, a single black-haired boy with blue eyes is serving as the instructor for these men. *Is he someone being obeyed respectfully even by the night wind in his surroundings? Only his place is wrapped up by silence in anything and everything. His lonely figure is standing still as if a landscape depicting the hidden beauty of mountains and rivers.*

Marko. A fearsome boy gazing out towards somewhere and hiding something.

What he held in those hands of him were... eggs. 2 per hand, 4 in total.

“Ah, did I keep you waiting for a bit? It’s still not completely boiled, right?” (Marko)

Wilma met him.

For Wilma it was an encounter and a mystery under this moonlight.

Chapter 21

Let's tell the story of a certain beast

It's not the scent of something drifting from the hot pot, is it? Nor is it something rising from my own stomach, right?

The proper convection, to the degree of making the inside of the tent warm and moist, is really pleasant. It is at the level of causing Akseli, who is a staunch career soldier, to get drowsy. Outside, separated by a cloth curtain, the ground has finished being dyed with spots of oily blood, the corpses are piled up on a wagon and even though the captured people are spending a night full of despair... the inside of the tent is calm and relaxed.

(Although it is said that the house represents the people living in it, just why...) (Akseli)

Akseli sipped the hot water and looked at the little girl sitting ahead of him through the steam. She is making the expression of someone who has accomplished something. Her smiling appearance is oozing with fulfillment and satisfaction from the bottom of her heart. Akseli believes that to be something wonderful. It is the same sight a craftsman, who did something with their heart and soul beforehand, shows.

However, this is likely intolerable for certain people... Akseli sneered in his mind. She doesn't adorn herself, doesn't hide and isn't arrogant. It's probably a horror for people who live by affectation, concealment and arrogance. She is preserving her own glory in an independent style. It is probably a threat for those people who live by depending on others' authority and reputation.

The Third Princess of the Asuria Kingdom, Paulina.

Her life has been in disorder due to the richly coloured ugliness in the fabric of human relationships surrounding her. With the First Princess Eleonora at the lead, many nobles don't conceal their spite towards her. It looks like they lost any kind of restraints with the king falling into sickness. Far from scornful laughter, anecdotes, making one want to doubt their sanity, could be heard.

Daniel is the source of the information. The young noble, who established the

Hakkinen guard corps and accomplished the subjugation of the mounted bandits, has become an existence who's known to absolutely everyone in the current royal court. It's because the Marquis Yurihalshira household has appointed him to a responsible post.

The Yurihalshira household is a great noble continuing to act as the wall of the royal family's clan since the old days of the kingdom's founding. Not only are they currently the leading household of the six Marquis' and four Earls, but they are also providing a number of commissioned officers in the upper ranks of the royal army. Their own territory is adjoining to the royal capital. The strength of their feudal army is at a level that they are even praised by the Eberia Empire, albeit being far away from the front-line. The strongest shield protecting the king, that is Yurihalshira.

Daniel is serving as one of many consultants of the legitimate child, invited into that household, but it seems he has the deep trust of the legitimate child as well as the Marquis. Akseli even greatly laughed at the sentence 「As it is, I won't come back unmarried」 written in a letter. 「If you are going to marry, you might as well do it at once」 were the words of Marko, which he remembered trembling in excitement.

Daniel's places of activity have reached many divergences in the capital. Due to the fact that the Yurihalshira household belongs to the First Princess faction, he is mingling enthusiastically with the warmongering nobles. He is especially close with the arduously enthusiastic nobles. Also, in relation to his family name, he also has profound friendly relations with the church. Moreover, with his looks and conduct, he is also magnificent as an asset in high society.

The information 「There is a plan to assassinate the Third Princess in the royal court」 was brought in by him. It was something planned much earlier than the announcement of the princesses going on a tour of visitations in the northern territories of the kingdom.

The mastermind isn't clear. The first Princess or the church... or possibly it's a conspiracy of both sides working together? The assassination plan is to take Paulina to the Plain of Wandering Calamity, murder her there and announce that it is assumed to have been done by the imperial army of Eberia. Although it is a crude plan to the degree one doesn't know from where to investigate it, going by Akseli, it's impossible to laugh at it, taking into account the plan's objective of how to simply deal with Paulina.

A declaration of war against the Eberia Empire as well as a large-scale invasion into the Empire's domain.

The military forces, that were amassed after the "Holy Flame Festival," the desire to fight, which was drawn to the limit like a bow string, it is a plan to let all that erupt in a grand fire by sacrificing a single, in name only, princess. In front of that goal neither objective facts nor calm judgements are worth to be taken into consideration. The masses might plummet into a craze. They might shed tears by embracing 「The tragedy of the Third Princess」. They might joyfully support a large army. Akseli is able to affirm that. It's such a kind of country, this one.

Marko dismissed that plan with a laugh and worked out a counter-plan.

Daniel is the executor of the plan in the capital. First he informed Marquis Yurihalshira of the plan for the princesses to visit the Plain of Wandering Calamity. The Marquis isn't related to the assassination plot, and he is a character who hates eccentricity and erraticness. He immediately announced his knowledge as well as opposition to that plan. It was a fervent speech carefully considering the pain-stricken heart of the king as in "How can you increase the burden on the king's spirit."

Next he chose and contacted those, who have deep connections with the royal army among the nobles related to the assassination plot. And he preached the regrets of a general. For those, who are completely soldiers, there are two types of deaths, dying in honour and dying in disgrace. Even among the latter type of deaths, it is the greatest shame to die by execution due to being held responsible. And that is particularly avoided between generals at the front as, in the worst case, it won't be possible to evade a decline in the entire army's morale if such a thing happens. To manage the situation in a way that it won't turn out like that, they boost the moral influence of the lords.

And he whispered into the ears of the radicals among the warmongers: There's no mistake in first looking how many of those tenacious bandit folks, who are similar to vermin, are lurking in the mountains and forests. Since some of them were also mixed in among the people from the Eberia Empire, they were fighting, it's likely those people are connected to the west through the mountains. If they tossed money at them or at least pestered them towards the empire's domain, they might get useful. Of course, it's the same story for the other side as well, though.

At the end he disseminated rumours: Making Earl Helrevi a miser, who regards the

royal army and the royal capital as a high cost, low return project and thus severely hates them since it's endless. Without having stood on the battlefield even once in the previous war, he is someone who misunderstands money counting and the amassing of wealth as righteousness. The delayed transportation schedule of military goods towards the front lines until recently serves as proof of that being the reason for him belonging to the warmongers.

Adding one thing to the other, it's something he made Wilma, who is the maid officer of Paulina, understand while feigning it to be a coincidence: He was worried about the health of the young princess as the miasma in the north is powerful. It might become a reasonable trip, if she brought up the princess poor physical health from the start. Also, in case they were to go to the Helrevi Earldom, she should give the lieutenant of the feudal army, Akseli Anel, his best regards. Akseli is excellent.

The coloured-water, which he dribbled here and there, flows into a single place after bouncing from one place to the next. The assassination plot, which was sloppy to begin with, transforms its character into one Marko had imagined, even saving the drunken people dazzled by its results.

The princesses tour of visitations was changed. Suspending the entire Plain of Wandering Calamity inspection, it resulted in Paulina being treated as an outcast due to her poor physical health. It was decided that the First and Second Princess each would encourage the troops at the two front-line territories, inspire their morale and wait for the signal, that being the news of the death... of the third princess, who headed towards the north-eastern Helrevi Earldom by herself.

Akseli is the executioner of the plan in the Helrevi Earldom. Since they identified the commanding officer of the infantry unit being someone, who has taken part in the planning of the assassination plot within the territory, it was a simple task to induce him afterwards. Being able to use Bertrand's organization was a big plus as well. All of the territory's underground acted as supporters, as eyes and ears and as hands and feet. And their influence has even reached deep inside the feudal army.

Once they departed towards Kikomaru after forming the ranks of troops in the vicinity of the carriage... it would already be easy. That's because Marko is at the place, which was arranged as actual assassination site. Seeing through everything, he is waiting while smiling.

A strategy, which began on a grand scale, has born small results.

Marko, who led them to the location where they could spread their tents, aimed at the same time for three 「suitable criteria」. It must be easy for the princess to spend her time comfortably. It must be easy to carry out the assassination. And lastly, it must be easy to prepare an ambush. Once the man, who wore a green hood, blended in amongst the village's farmers, it was nothing more than waiting for an opportunity.

He goes to pick up some eggs and returns.

It took only this much time for the assassination plot to become a failure.

(Refined noodles with eggs on them, eh...? That's something nice. It is worthy of being staple food.) (Akseli)

Akseli thought back to the taste of the 2 or 3 bowls of refined noodles he had consumed. He has recalled the good feeling of the noodles sliding down his throat once again. Paulina's exquisite skill wasn't only limited to her foot technique. Her appearance of stretching the dough with flour and a wooden pole has the mysteriousness of a sword-smith. It's at a level that you had to gaze at the accuracy and precision of her thinly cutting the dough with a cooking knife into squares.

And once it was filled into the cauldron and boiled until it's done, no words were necessary within the tent anymore. Sometimes moaning and sometimes leaking a sigh of admiration, we ate the noodles. The thing called eating time for delicious cooking takes priority over everything... probably, Akseli thought.

Time has been flowing on gently.

Akseli simply surrendered himself to that flow. Marko's plan is still on-going. There isn't much time for the next action to lead to the action after that, once dawn breaks. But, in regards to this night, Akseli's job is to wait. He has to wait for a single decision.

The one deciding is Marko.

About the girl, whom Daniel discovered and Akseli brought along.

There are several things Marko requires on this continent, which has grown tense. One among those is "noble birth." It's the same matter as with the name of the former Baron Hakkinen household, which was used a lot. At present Marko is the shadow ruler of the Helrevi Earldom. Without showing the slightest indication of stagnating into being content with his present condition due to that, he is trying to expand his

influence even more. If it becomes like that, it's necessary to prepare the next figurehead. 3 people were nominated as candidates.

One is the legitimate child of the Marquis Yurihalshira household, where Daniel is serving as one of the consultants. His character is refreshing and he has good prospects for the future. He is the child of a powerful family, of which one cannot possibly desire anything else with the exception of the royal family. He is also emotionally attached to Daniel.

Another one is the daughter of the First Princess, Eleonora. She is still very young and also has an elder brother above her. Anyhow, in the current state it's certain that she is a child of the most influential person of the kingdom. Her advantage is that she still isn't under the influence of anyone either.

And, the last one is the Third Princess, Paulina. For various reason she has been isolated from noble society. She is even treated coldly by the church's authorities. Judging from the state of affairs, she is an existence who is glittering with nothing but unsuitableness for the right of succession to the crown.

The last person has been observed by Daniel day and night. The other two are far too young in age on top of being difficult to access. It is conceivable that among the 3 people she is someone difficult to get close to due to secluding herself in the royal villa, but... that's when we heard about this time's assassination plot. Marko worked out a plan, however that's not for the sake of protecting Paulina. It's for the sake of assessing her. Everything has been done in order to probe whether she is worthy of being chosen. And tonight that time is approaching.

"There was once a certain beast." (Marko)

The voice is transparent in the tent as if it's the sound of flute's note. Marko is observing Paulina. Catching that, Paulina is sitting demurely.

"That beast has a viral swelling on its back. Since that is sending poison through the whole body by sticking to the blood, it will result in its death, if ignored. Because the beast doesn't want to die, it injures itself and thus lengthened its life by shedding the poisonous blood. However, since it's necessary to keep bleeding, it becomes thin and weak. It becomes a body, which is even cruel to look at." (Marko)

Marko speaks. It was a story Akseli never heard before.

“It’s also grave to have an injury. Making a mistake in adjusting the cutting open of the skin once, it nearly died because of that. It stopped the bleeding in a panic, but, having done that, the poison continued to circulate. An ingenious salvation and great effort are necessary. What pitiful, sad situation it is. While becoming bloodstained, it can only be delighted over itself not dying.” (Marko)

His narrative voice is reverberating mysteriously within the tent. Akseli felt as if he himself has wandered into the world of an eerie daydream. It apparently changed the warm and calm mood of the tent’s material into a feeling of distance. All of the surroundings became awfully far. Akseli, questioning whether he didn’t shrink, touched his own body with his hands.

“Moreover, the poison doesn’t drain out completely. Lengthening its life, even if only by a bit... it is only skilfully wounding its own body until the day, when it will die in due course. There was such a beast, I hear. That’s all.” (Marko)

Akseli also didn’t think that he wants to hear what happens beyond that point in the story, which abruptly ended. He considered it to be a story with no salvation. *Furthermore, it’s somehow repulsive.* Unbecoming of his age, dread travelled along Akseli’s spine.

Once he checks, it was the same for Wilma. Laying bare her fear with a ghastly pale face, she is hugging her own body with both hands. Akseli is unable to laugh at that. He is trembling himself as well.

“And then, what happens? Does the beast die?” (Paulina)

It was Paulina. In a state unchanged in any way from before the story began, she asked Marko while tilting her small head to the side. Akseli sees a strangeness in that. In the world within the tent, which became vast and increased in distance, Paulina is sitting magnificently without being perturbed in any way. It’s not her being mentally slow, having a blank mind or such. Her inner substantiality hasn’t changed either.

“Well... I wonder about that. Even I don’t know what will happen in the future from there.” (Marko)

“But”, Marko smiled.

“You are an interesting one to be still thinking about the continuation of the story. Please tell me, if you thought up a great continuation. I will try to ponder about the

continuation as well... and convey it to Your Highness, the princess.” (Marko)

As Marko bowed politely, Paulina nodded with a 「Yeah」 .

One choice was done here.

Akseli made sure that he wouldn't forget this moment's situation throughout his lifetime. Exactly in this moment it has become the first, minimal mark, which will give birth to huge ripple in history. *It starts from here on.* He had that conviction.

His body shivered.

The revisit of Akseli Anel in Kikomaru; the first day ended like that.

Chapter 22

Something unnecessary isn't wanted

The civil officials standing close-by, the civil officials standing alongside the wall and even the person within the painting, hanging on the wall on top of that, are peeking my way catching glimpses and rolling their eyes. Chewing their foolish abuses within their shut mouths, they are indulging in worthless fantasies within their seedy-looking heads. He is confident in that.

(The stares of fools. Every last of them doesn't understand anything!) (Mathias)

While restlessly pacing around the entrance hall of the territory's castle, Earl Mathias Helrevi gnawed on the nails of his hand with his front teeth. Was it the effect of him keeping at it since early morning? Repeatedly making a sound of gritting, he has been smoothing his teeth as well as his nails. He isn't even in the mood to take some breakfast as his stomach feels nothing but chills.

A single soldier came rushing into the entrance hall. Even as Mathias shows a reaction at the level of springing up, he didn't rush over on his own accord. Lowering his chin, he widens his legs and awaits the soldier.

"The cavalry came into sight! They will reach the gate any time soon!"

"Yeah! Alright! It doesn't matter whether it's soldiers or prisoners, accompany Her Highness, the princess, to this place safely no matter what! Akseli, there's Akseli as well. Tell that guy to carry out his duty without negligence to the very end!" (Mathias)

Mathias wholeheartedly spins around and gave further orders: "Deploy a line of cavalry soldiers in front of the gate to take the place of the princess' escort, place archers on top of the ramparts and close the gates, enforce martial law in the city, immediately arrest those who undertake suspicious actions among the people and soldiers."

Before long the carriage enters the territory's castle. Once the princess made an appearance at the spacious entrance hall, Mathias kneeled supposedly perfectly according to etiquette and in a dignified manner.

“For the body of Her Highness, the princess, to be exposed to danger and for that deplorable and foolish undertaking to be done by imprudent fellows in my domain, it is truly very, very regrettable. I’m deeply, deeply ashamed for my incompetence and lack of ability to not have sensed it before it happened. In the first place, this is...” (Mathias)

As he repeatedly piles up words while glaring at the floor’s stone paving, he was interrupted by the hesitating, serious voice of the maid officer. Mathias barely held back by clicking his tongue. There shouldn’t be any instance of disturbing the words of someone who is an Earl, with the exception of royalty. However, clicking a tongue at someone in front of royalty is also an unforgivable act.

“In regards to Her Highness, the princess, at the present...” (Mathias)

Trying to continue, Mathias noticed that the sounds of the footsteps were weird in some way. Once he looked, the princess was nodding off while standing. Holding her up with a desperate look, the maid officer is enduring to keep her upright. Clicking his tongue once again, Mathias got up.

There’s no noble, who isn’t aware of the ignorant manner of the Third Princess Paulina. Without political and economical authority, she isn’t blessed with beauty as a lady either. Having the rights of inheriting the throne in name only, she is a person, who only secludes herself within the royal villa.

However, Mathias doesn’t dislike this princess. That’s because there are absolutely no more than two types of royalty. Namely, royalty which spends money, and royalty which doesn’t. *If you compare her to someone like the Second Princess, who misunderstands her task as decorating herself with jewels and also pesters people to provide her with several dresses made out of quinn, Paulina is a superior person in regards to the succession rights of the crown. An idiot is an idiot though.*

“...Make sure of Her Highness’ well-being. Carry out your duty.” (Mathias)

Once told, the maid officer respectfully accepted the order and assisted the princess in leaving. Mathias unintentionally breathes a sigh. *It won’t do, if I don’t express my apology once again later on.* Having a social position, there’s no choice but for him to cope with who’s responsible by himself due to that reason.

“Your Excellency, first off, congratulations.” (Akseli)

There's always a person, who says such thing in this situation. Lieutenant Akseli Anel of the feudal army. As man, who has obtained accomplishments in military missions and secret missions within the territory, he is the commanding officer of the territory's capital's cavalry unit. At the same time as he is a man, who is one way or another useful for Mathias, he is also a man who seems lacking sincerity in some ways.

"What's there to be happy about? I received the report by a fast messenger, but weren't all 100 low-ranking soldiers of the infantry unit traitors?" (Mathias)

"Ha. Half were killed and the other half have been arrested. As they have been thrown into prison, do you wish to interrogate them Sir?" (Akseli)

"Unnecessary. We have seized those idiots over here as well. They won't provide us with any new information we haven't already obtained in the previous interrogations." (Mathias)

Thinking of the man, who screamed in the jail, Mathias remembered his headache. *Why did he go mad...?* The official rank of the man, who planned the assassination on the Third Princess, is the commanding officer of the territory's capital's infantry unit.

"Leaving that aside, how was the journey? Did mounted bandits appear? There are also rumours that imperial soldiers are trespassing into our domain. Are we able to guarantee the safety of the territory's capital's environs?" (Mathias)

"The returned 100 cavalry riders were dispatched on a patrolling mission right away. The 900 cavalry riders, who were dispatched as a welcome, well, all of them are distributed in front of the gate, I'm told." (Akseli)

"Yea, it's impossible to trust the infantry soldiers. It's a situation that shouldn't happen. This is...!" (Mathias)

This time Mathias definitely clicked his tongue without minding what others might think. The standing army of the territory's capital is 3000 soldiers strong. It is organized into three easy-to-understand divisions; cavalry, infantry and archers. The war supremacy advocates consider that as a typical organization of combat divisions compared to their side, but for Mathias, it's a wonderful army organization, which is able to reduce operating expenses without producing military factions. *Hands and feet, which are difficult to move, are unnecessary.*

It's an outrageous story since 100 soldiers of the infantry unit of those 3000 men tried

to assassinate the princess. With the infantry unit's commanding officer having ordered that, in the event that it had become an incident, himself, a colonel of the feudal army... being the chief, who unifies the three divisions, Mathias currently serves in that function alongside his position as feudal lord... he apparently firmly believed that he will be able to have a successful career because of that.

It's foolish. That's why I can't trust someone like soldiers, Mathias renewed his belief. *The day, something like an assassination of the princess happened within the territory, the concerned soldiers would be convicted of a capital crime altogether.* Mathias himself feels that it wouldn't end with just that either. *My life aside, I'm certain that it would put my territory, my position and my peerage in jeopardy.*

Moreover, the royal court's situation has turned into an extremely disadvantageous state for Mathias. Mathias considered the long-standing military authorities a burden because of his attitude of hating the waste of resources in war, but with the influence of the warmongers, even among the nobles only increasing, he can only sigh as the First Princess Eleonora is spearheading them. His true opinion is that he wants the king to recover his health right away. In the first place, it has been the king's intention for Mathias to govern the north-eastern area, which is essential for the supply. *I'm someone fulfilling the responsibility of my position silently without excess or deficiency, but... I can't deny that there are flaws.*

It's the mounted bandits. A stagnation in the transport schedule of military goods, which can't be ignored, was created because of the accumulated attacks during the transport. That means that the replenishment of the war potential at the front was delayed. Even though the mounted bandits were currently keeping a low profile, the military authorities and the warmongers are observing Mathias with distrust.

Within such a situation, an improper rumour in relation to Mathias is flying about in the recent royal capital. His opinion about war hasn't any kind of shameful aspect, as it's his very own conviction, however it was terribly vexing to be told that he aimed for the stagnation in the transport schedule. There's also the matter of having vague fears about the excitement of the warmongering nobles. *If I allowed something like the assassination of a princess within the territory at this present time...* Mathias can't imagine anything but an troublesome future.

It was definitely a happy occasion, if you look at it with such meaning. As result of the man, in front of him fighting hard, the worst case was avoided. However, Mathias is only frowning. It was also the man in front of him, who raised the danger of

assassination by taking the princess to a distant place outside a castle.

“...How do you assess this situation, Lieutenant Anel?” (Mathias)

“How, you ask?” (Akseli)

“It’s about the development from here on! Granted that Paulina-sama was safe, we can’t hide the fact that there was an attack. Eleonora-sama is right close-by, just across the river. How... how should we move? What should I do...!?” (Mathias)

Currently Mathias has been temporarily enclosed by a situation he never experienced. Moreover, it’s the troublesome kind, where you can’t measure everything with numbers. Such a situation is what he hates the most. He likes to prepare diligently and to deal with things indifferently. Everything should progress in tranquility. He believed coping with unplanned matters is something to be avoided.

“Even if the misfortune was reduced, it’s still misfortune. How about cheating them by changing it into a rather auspicious event?” (Akseli)

Hearing words with an unexpectedly cheerful impression, Mathias ended up staring at the face of his subordinate. *This man has always understood things with his somewhat intelligent mind. Although his attitude is a problem, he is an excellent man. If that wasn’t the case, I wouldn’t leave the cavalry, who is the elite of the Helrevi feudal army, to him.*

“...Go ahead.” (Mathias)

Mathias respects intellect over the body. *To some extent this man... at least among the territory’s military officers is getting close to having my highest and biggest trust and it’s not because of his battle ability or military exploits. Exposing the fraud within the territory, he has accomplishments of straightening out twisted matters with rationality. He had a wish he clung to.*

“In order to repel the assassins, I made use of the villagers. It’s only natural for the fief’s population to cooperate with us, but even amongst them, the son of the village’s headman protected Her Majesty, the princess, with his brilliant actions. If we publicly award this dedication as an example for the people, we will demonstrate that we are filled that much with loyalty towards the kingdom, that it will even reach the remote areas within the territory.” (Akseli)

This appears to be a high gain, low cost plan, Mathias predicts. Is it a recoil to the disappeared damages by the mounted bandits in the recent Earldom Helrevi? It has been said that people, like villagers and merchants, have a strong local commitment. Mathias has been satisfied with the increase in tax yields, just as planned, however there were also some, who fear that to cause the ruling government to slack. Even so, it was a big point to obtain a moving tale for the sake of improving our reputation. All the more in this kind of situation.

“Hmm, isn’t that a good plan?” (Mathias)

Mathias believes that a bit of vitality returned into his body.

“For the territory’s rule this will probably be sufficient, but well, the problem lies with the feudal army.” (Akseli)

“Good grief, what a mess”, Mathias wanted to strangle the head, which is shaking sideways. *This man is like that. He slips in unnecessary childishness whenever possible. It would probably be helpful, if I could drag out only his brain’s knowledge without him having to use his mouth as intermediary,* Mathias thinks.

“Since the assassins originate from the feudal army, there’s no way that the army would be able to loudly boast about having attacked them as distinguished war service. After all, it has been friendly fire. It won’t do, if we don’t show the army’s pride by approaching it from a different point of view here. Accordingly, I have an excellent plan.” (Akseli)

Don’t close one eye, don’t raise a finger, go ahead with your talk quickly... Mathias endures all these things with an effort.

“As Your Excellency commands, I will establish the “Royal Guard Unit” of Her Highness, the princess.” (Akseli)

Mathias is hit by the strong impact of those words and his body trembled by the conviction of having discovered a means of escape. *The man, who should have decisively broken fingers and crushed eyes, suddenly appears to be a fairly charming person. It was certainly an ingenious idea.*

Royal Guard Unit.

It’s an independent unit that doesn’t belong to the feudal army or the royal army. Its

large difference to a “chivalric order”, which possesses similar traits, is primarily its servitude. In contrast to chivalric orders, which are private troops of influential nobles, the royal guard unit is a private army of royalty. And, it’s possible to procure financial aid from the national treasury due to that difference. It’s the special privilege of royalty.

And, currently not a single royal guard unit exists within the Asuria Kingdom. The reason is that there’s a safety zone around the royal capital, but the biggest reason is the friendly relationship between royalty and nobles, who organize themselves into factions. There’s no necessity to establish a royal guard unit since the chivalric order can be moved as the private troops of royalty. Rather, it will end up as proof of mutual distrust.

However, only the Third Princess Paulina’s situation is different.

She has been completely isolated among the nobles, and is an existence unrelated to something like factions. Without even having court ladies, the best she could do was to welcome the daughter of a rural Knight as a maid officer. Such a person was exposed to danger for her life. A single Earl grieves over that as it’s a situation that damages the dignity of the kingdom. Right, this is something unrelated to the rules of the feudal army and such. Passion and power return to Mathias’ body.

“I... I see! It’s important that it’s not a chivalric order but a royal guard unit!” (Mathias)

“That’s right. Since it’s not like Your Excellency can establish and organize it, if it’s a royal guard unit, it won’t result in the formation of a faction centered around Her Majesty, the princess, either. Being a noble undertaking one can call deeply loyal towards the kingdom, it’s evidence that you have taken the attempted assassination of the princess more serious than anyone else. Besides...” (Akseli)

At the end he once again closes one eye and raises the index finger. How pretentious. However, Mathias tolerated it.

“Since a royal guard unit ought to be a burden on the national treasury, the financing part will be fully supplemented by Your Excellency.” (Akseli)

“I understand at least this much”, Mathias laughed in good humour. That’s why he didn’t realize. The sensation of his own choice being engraved into the history of the continent. At just this moment, when it’s written in bold letters as it’s a decisively important incident, he laughed without noticing anything. He saw the path to escape from his predicament. He absolutely didn’t care about something like the path, which

is seen by the commanding officer of the cavalry chuckling next to him.

And, a single army is founded in Asuria Kingdom.

It's an army for the sake of the Third Princess. It's the sole royal guard unit in the kingdom.

The white cloth, which is Paulina's treasure. The refined noddles dish, which she is good at. Those two symbols were used to create the white, long-trailing flag... also known as "White Current Flag." The ones flying that banner is an armed group of 1500 soldiers.

The leader is Akseli Anel, former Lieutenant of the feudal army. Being the person, who settled the case of the Third Princess assassination attempt, he is a soldier, who served as the commanding officer of the cavalry unit of the Helrevi feudal army. Having even the deep trust of the feudal lord, Earl Helrevi, he might have commanded the entire feudal army as Colonel one day, however, feeling more regretful than anyone that such incident happened, he put his own life on the line to establish the royal guard unit... that's how it has been announced.

The men, who gathered because of his call, can truly be called loyal patriots in regards to the Earldom Helrevi. 500 elite riders, who applied from the feudal army's cavalry unit, 500 enthusiastic soldiers, who shed bloody tears due to the foolish undertaking of their colleagues from the feudal army's infantry unit and 500 volunteers from that Hakkinen guard corps, which cooperates in sustaining the public order within the territory, gathered. Among those are the renowned leaders of the guard corps called Jarkko, a former sergeant, and Oiva. A congratulatory address was delivered from Baron Hakkinen as well.

And, the name of a single boy was written down at the end of the register of names.

Then name of the son of Kikomaru's village headman, Marko. A 13 years old boy with blue eyes and black hair, it is said that he played an active role when Paulina was in danger. Earl Helrevi has publicly acknowledged his loyalty and courage and tried to accept him as adopted child of a branch family, but the boy firmly refused that. He stated that he did it as something natural, himself being of the fief's population and a citizen of this kingdom. In addition to his unselfish manner, his name alongside the impressive tale is being recounted within the kingdom. He will definitely become an example for the kingdom's people.

Right... it's not only Earl Mathias Helrevi. Everyone failed to notice something. No one realized it. No one understood at all what has begun here.

The time when the White Current Flag will flutter on the battlefield is the autumn of this year.

Chapter 23

The Royal Capital that existed in the distant past

“That was surely a sight, wasn’t it? I wanted to be with you as well.” (Daniel)

Did he imagine the situation in his mind? Daniel smiled happily. *He is giving off an attractive aura independent of time and place, much less to say about the various, good-looking appearances flooding the multicoloured capital.* Akseli considered himself to be slightly pitiful. *I have been losing weight in comparison to the time when I was still good with both, sword and spear.* His daily worries became very intense.

“I’m aware that I followed out of interest, too... At the time Earl Helrevi took both hands of Marko, half of me was amused and the other half was frightened. Although I hid my face, I felt the chilly gazes.” (Akseli)

Once Akseli said that, Daniel burst into loud laughter unable to stand it any longer. And they drank sake together. It is a full set of an expensive shop, expensive sake and expensive dishes, but they are able to compensate this much with money. The quality of the conversation and the partner to talk with is what’s always hard to get.

The conversation topic of the two, located in a room of a high-class bar in the capital, is the details of Marco’s recent public acknowledgement in the Earldom Helrevi.

Did he become emotionally unstable in the enacted crisis? Earl Mathias Helrevi displayed excessive behaviour towards the person who was to be commended. He, who should honor formality, stepped up next to Marco on the platform and requested something like a handshake, while not stopping to highly praise him. The surroundings were taken aback and it resulted in a taste of wanting to run away due to the bizarreness.

Akseli went too far. It was an over-production.

There wasn’t even any specification of a 『Handshaking with the Feudal Lord』 in Marko’s plans. Producing an auspicious event by using a child from a village in a remote region, it’s for saving the feudal lord’s reputation and position... the purpose was to increase the influential voice of Akseli by using such a suggestion. Shake up Mathias,

throw him into confusion and then show him hope. It would raise his spiritual dependence on Akseli.

They prepared several alternatives for the course of events afterwards, but by Marko choosing Paulina, they have established her royal guard unit. Akseli induced Mathias so that it would turn out like that.

Everything progressed as Marco had imagined it... no, it should have progressed. Shouldn't it be mostly as planned? The executioner of the plan has been affected by the changes in the expected on that occasion.

It's Akseli. He ended up thinking. *It will be truly regrettable for Marko to merely become famous as nothing but a simple, virtuous villager. Isn't it possible to make it even grander? Isn't it fine to obtain even bigger benefits? It's a settled future that Marko will lead an army, but can't something be done to make that army bigger by even a single soldier or to enrich it by a single spear?*

It's a family name. Using the kingdom's authority, namely Earl Helrevi, Akseli wanted for Marko to obtain a family name. He will be limited in many things with his origins as a commoner, who doesn't have a surname. For example, it will be impossible to inaugurate Marko as the leader of the royal guard unit. Although such a thing won't have any meaning in the future, he wanted Marko to exhibit his own capability for the sake of advancing towards that future in a stronger organization.

Concretely, he thoroughly praised Marko in front of Earl Helrevi. "Understand, that boy's uprightness and clean-handedness doesn't wish for a reward, he has a keen mind to plan measures against the cold-weather damage in Kikomaru, his assiduousness towards the state of paying the taxes in Kikomaru. Not to mention his devotion and courage. Certainly that kind of boy is the fruit of Your Excellency's good government."

Having such back and forth, it's Akseli, who sympathized with the hardships of Earl Helrevi so far and who pointed out the imaginary danger. *It's my mission to raise Earl Helrevi's dependency towards myself...* on ground of such pretext, he continued to distort his own plan.

And, it has resulted in the middle-aged Earl taking the hand of the boy, while overcome with emotions, becoming a part of the plan. Earl Helrevi declared that he wants to adopt the commoner Marko into the branch family of the Earl household. *If only Marko*

accepted it, it would likely result in the nobles within the kingdom increasing by one more. He will obtain a family name.

However, Marko refused that.

His figure of politely, but firmly, refusing while abasing himself might reach the quality of a moving tale. It seems that Earl Helrevi was also savouring the far stronger deep emotion. Akseli perceived that as kind of self-glorification though.

“Marko is well aware of the usefulness of a noble.” (Daniel)

Akseli lifted his gaze due to due to Daniel’s suddenly audible voice. Apparently he was staring at the surface of the sake cup before he realized it.

“At least he grasps it better than me. Their nature too. The days in the capital are, even for me, a study of nobles. I have fully realized my days of ignorance, where I lived passively.” (Daniel)

Daniel, who says that while gulping down his sake, observed Akseli with a quiet gaze.

“I intend to comprehend what were your thoughts by going beyond your instructions. Moreover, let me tell you, it’s premature for Marko to appear on the public stage of political strife.” (Daniel)

It was the statement of a man, who struggles with what actions to precisely take, being truly deep within the whirlpool of political strife right now. It isn’t a tone of reproach. However, the absence of any hesitation made an impression on Akseli.

“...Is the branch family of Earl Helrevi saddled with more burdens than benefits?” (Akseli)

“Quite so.” (Daniel)

Because of his assertive tone, he was able to understand the dimensions of the troubles anticipated by Daniel.

“Currently the First Princess stands at the top of political power. The four Marquis’ and six Earls are in the process of losing their unity just like before. The factional conflicts are fierce. They are more or less staying peaceful due to having two points of attack, outside and inside, do you understand?” (Daniel)

“Hmm. For outside there is no other choice but the Eberia Empire. For inside it is...”
(Akseli)

Akseli deliberates. His smile vanished when he discovered one possibility. He was aware about her being isolated and being hated among the nobles. However, with that stemming from the individual feelings of a single influential person, he believed that the surroundings conformed to that out of a kind of sycophancy and similar emotions.

“You don’t mean...” (Akseli)

Even as a joke, persecuting a royal member, as sacrifice, for the sake of maintaining the political unity within the kingdom? Is that even possible? That’s an utterly two-edged sword! If the king’s authority was damaged and plummeted due to that, the nobility would rise in power. Can’t that be even regarded as a civil war in the coming in the kingdom...? Akseli cannot avoid being perplexed.

However, Daniel only lowers his chin silently.

“It’s just as you imagined. To be exact, not only her, but the entire household from her mother’s side are “sheep”, but... there are traitors among the former Earl Hiltoora’s family. It’s a common practice of the capital to criticize them as disgrace of nobles. Otherwise, they probably cannot resist feeling uneasy. After all is said and done, the country was once close to destruction after all.” (Daniel)

Daniel’s eyes are sorrowfully peeking into the sake cup. *What are you seeing in there...?* His mouth has warped gracefully.

“All of the Asuria Kingdom nobles are upstarts, after all. The soil of their ancestors has been stolen by dispossession. At that time they had been cornered to the places, where only the forest of a demonic domain lies beyond... That’s why they relied on the hero. They should have implored to the church through the hero? I have no doubt that they desperately wanted the church’s power and the military force of the Holy Knights as support. In fact, the kingdom recovered by obtaining that assistance. What rose the hero, in desperation, was that war. It cannot possibly be something desired by the noble’s dignity. The truth of the capital, is that they are mutually observing each other’s countenance.” (Daniel)

Akseli sees Daniel’s weakly, laughing face as owed to his tragic memories. *It seems that the capital’s darkness runs deeper than I imagined. Although it’s upon Marko’s*

instructions, how much anxiety does Daniel, who has been forced into this lone battle, possess?

“Good grief... I think I understood the reason why nobles frequently hold banquets. All of them want to cling to a dream. The hero’s tragedy, the evil man’s burning at the stake and even the heroic tale of my father and elder brother, just about anything is shrouded in a mist of illusions. The shape of the truth is definitely pitiful and reeking of blood.” (Daniel)

He took a long, painful sigh.

“The talk got off track. In other words, the establishment of a royal guard unit at this time was a far more dangerous move than you are thinking, Sir. It’s the excellence of Marko’s plan, which was able to certainly accomplish that, but... there is a reason why he chose and used Earl Helrevi for that. Do you understand it?” (Daniel)

“It’s his sincerity in not flattering those in the shadows of the First Princess and the princess herself. If one says it impudently, though.” (Akseli)

“Right. That man, for better or worse, doesn’t move for anything but his own narrow motives. He followed the plan this time because it was consistent with those. No matter how his surroundings react to that, it will be fine as long as it concurs with the reasoning within that man. That’s because he believes the people, who don’t understand that reasoning, to be evil.” (Daniel)

“Quite the awkward personage.” (Akseli)

The two smiled wryly together. It’s a person both of them know well.

“However, if that’s the case, then it won’t rise much of a discord to be named as the Earl’s branch family, will it? They have been considered a troublesome household to begin with... well, it will also be difficult to secure allies though.” (Akseli)

“That’s true. I’m certain he will be able to deal with the various noble affairs adequately. It will likely turn into a journey similar of having 100 victories by having 100 battles, however... even if it takes time, I can’t imagine Marko losing.” (Daniel)

Both of them nod in regards to that. Both of them deeply trust their master. “However”, Daniel continued,

“the church will be a problem.” (Daniel)

He said that as if tasting something disgusting on his tongue.

“Earl Mathias Helrevi is making light of the church’s authority. “Priests don’t meddle in politics”, is his attitude. He doesn’t hesitate to criticize its current power of influence as something improper. In regards to this, all of the kingdom’s nobles are feeling more or less in the same way, therefore it’s no exaggeration to say that the fame of that man among the nobles has been supported by that instead, but...” (Daniel)

“The First Princess isn’t amused, I guess. She once had a love relationship with the hero of true holiness and her current husband is a former Holy Knight.” (Akseli)

“Just like you said. The influence on the kingdom by the church was established during the war, but currently there’s also the aspect that it’s a result desired by her. Do you also know about the case with the maid officer, Sir?” (Daniel)

“The story about the treasured swords.” (Akseli)

Among the maid officers, who had been assigned to serve each of the 3 princesses, only Wilma, who serves the Third Princess Paulina, wasn’t bestowed a treasured sword by the church. That’s a fact.

“I thought the First Princess inspired the church for the sake of harassment, but... after listening to the conversation this far, it seems to be different.” (Akseli)

“Yes, I believe the matter with the treasured swords is similar to proof that the church is helping with the persecution. And, that has changed into conviction, after hearing about today’s acknowledgement ceremony.” (Daniel)

Acknowledgement ceremony. There is a reason for Akseli to be here, in the capital, this evening. The establishment of Third Princess Paulina’s royal guard unit has been a success. Although most of its work was finished in the Earldom Helrevi, a ceremony to acknowledge the unit was held by the royal castle. Originally the unit’s establishment would be acknowledged by a blessing from the archbishop and a speech from the princess, after that the entire unit would be reviewed by the king. However, it was decided to finish it informally because of the circumstances.

Due to the reason that the princess safety isn’t guaranteed during the journey, she hasn’t left the Earldom Helrevi’s castle and thus the royal guard unit, whose task is to

protect her, was still detained in the territorial capital as well. Only the unit's leader, Akseli, quickly travelled to the royal capital by himself, but only the king's words of acknowledgement were passed on by a governmental official as proxy and not a single priest, not even to mention the archbishop, was dispatched by the church.

Akseli didn't mind it thinking "Such is life, I guess", however after hearing the story from Daniel, he sees things he couldn't see before. Suffering such treatment in the capital with the First Princess absent and the meaning behind it.

"The church's influence is considerable. The authority of the four Marquis' and six Earls is sufficiently able to oppose it, but currently it's not a situation where one can hope for their unity. Thus, if the church finds fault in Marko's adoption, what will happen?" (Daniel)

Akseli was currently given information he didn't know. Once he connected it one by one, a scenery came into view. Unintentionally a cold shiver travels along Akseli's spine. Daniel continues his words.

"Earl Helrevi is critical towards the church. Such a person purposely gave a villager an exceptional promotion, going even as far as welcoming him as adopted child. That boy, who is widely known to have great loyalty towards the king, is made into a member of the royal guard unit of the Third Princess, who is persecuted by the church. According to his family status, he has to become the unit's leader. The result of that is..." (Daniel)

"...He will be regarded as an enemy by the First Princess as well as the church. Even without him having created a faction, this personnel affair will become similar to a declaration of war against the church." (Akseli)

"That's right. Because it would be pointless for Marko to just stay Marko, this plan would produce an unforeseen disaster. It would become a matter of severing the excellent balance of this time's royal guard unit establishment." (Daniel)

Finishing to say that, Daniel slowly topped up his sake and started to drink it slowly again. While observing his appearance without seeing it, Akseli strongly gripped both his knees. He is furious at his own thoughtlessness. Akseli believes it was a rash act after meeting a person, who believes and sees all of his abilities, a person, who was familiar with opponents taking measure.

How far ahead is one able to look? How much into the distance can one see?... when all

is said and done, that will turn into the power of a strategy. Akseli imagined Marko in his mind. It's for the sake of watching and correcting his own appearance. He, who got conceited in front of that Earl, wanted to reform himself by being aware of his lord's blue eyes. He didn't want to remain foolish as is.

"I have... still a long way to go." (Akseli)

"What, me too. I will lament my own powerlessness for much longer still." (Daniel)

He silently filled up the sake. And Daniel says,

"Akseli, do you remember the story of the white wolf-kun?" (Daniel)

"Yes... there was such a thing. It's a story, which is painful for the current me to listen to." (Akseli)

"That's not so. Let's both play our role and wait for our chance. It's alright to take the role of the white wolf-kun, it's also alright to snarl together and then again it's also alright to win by forestalling... there are countless things we ought to do." (Daniel)

Daniel smiled. Akseli's belief is that he understands its meaning. During the small motion of gulping down the sake cup in one go, his expression took the shape of a smile. This time he ended up being over-eager, but Akseli's conviction is that he isn't so inexperienced and soft to get disheartened because of that. *My lord has said it, there is a me, who will become a general.* A lot of power wells up within him.

The two have talked well and about many things... and each of them will head to their own battlefield.

In either eyes burned the fighting spirit to make them act with all their souls.

Chapter 24

As someone well-versed in village building

That can't be regarded as anything but an abandoned fortress at first sight, Lauri began a serious survey of the surroundings. The summer grass is densely growing all over. The boundary between the crumbled rampart and the dried soil is exceedingly vague. That fortress which likely stood firmly within nature before, was now in a state similar to an empty shell which has been worn down by wind and snow.

(Did I make a mistake in the path and arrived at a stronghold of bandits... that can't be, right?) (Lauri)

Lauri's face has a cramp as he isn't able to deny that unpleasant possibility. Without carrying anything but the least amount of luggage, he doesn't even wear a small weapon. Considering that as his own negligence, as he got used to the public order of the Helrevi Earldom, Lauri couldn't avoid being made strongly aware of that at his current location.

It's the region located in the north of Marquis Maruyalanta's territory which is on the northern side of Asuria Kingdom's centre. It is in this region that the largest city, called Chitoga City, can be found. It is thriving based on its distribution of goods with its important position in the water transportation connected to the Eastern Dragon River and its branches. The large river for transporting to south and north, the branches for transporting to west and east... That sight brimming with liveliness was also something familiar to Lauri.

If you advance south from that big city, one will gradually enter rugged terrain. From the fact that it can also be seen as winding waves of hills and forests through the eyes of the men who traveled on water, that area has been given the common name "Land's Water Surface." It's an area which travelers don't approach at all. Everyone chooses to be shaken in a boat by paying small change.

The reason for it being avoided is obvious. Because it has been neglected in a state of having the main road destroyed, the paths are extremely bad. The road towards the capital becomes level once one leaves south from this place... The Land's Water Surface is an ancient battlefield where a fierce battle between the armies of the Asuria

Kingdom and the Eberia Empire unfolded. The Plain of Wandering Calamity which became the front line at this point in time is convenient for water transportation and accordingly, this region was left behind without even a single glance back.

However, Lauri made a journey to that Land's Water Surface. It can't be helped since his destination is located there. Among the large and small military bases which were built in a great number during the war, it is a fortress that housed the king himself, alongside his chivalric order, for a time. After it was taken by the Empire's army, it became something that has only its name noted down on maps.

(As expected, it's impossible, right?... Yeah, impossible.) (Lauri)

Lauri is pondering already about his way back since there isn't a single flag fluttering. *Now is still fine as it's early in the day, but it seems unexpected danger will approach me once it becomes night.* Lauri imagined ghosts, witches and ruffians as they appear in illustrated stories. *It's really not unlikely for such beings to infest the nights in this fortress.*

Let's at least check just the main gate of the fortress... Lauri advances while being troubled with the bad footing. At a spot that appeared to have traces of the crumbled main gate he discovered a giant who is napping while holding onto his sword.

"Oiva!" (Lauri)

"Mmh? Ooh, Lauri, you came?" (Oiva)

He released a big yawn towards the blue sky. He is a mighty warrior one can only look up to once he stood up. Lauri, who has no fighting ability, can do nothing but admire his appearance, which is revealing his strength by him just naturally standing there like this.

"Huh? You came alone? Though it's fine to at least take some guards along." (Oiva)

"It's a habit from my days as peddler. I like to travel quickly by myself. However, there are some points I regretted a bit, too. It's a region that has gone beyond my expectations. This Land's Water Surface is..." (Lauri)

"Yes, it is indeed. It must have been a fairly troublesome place even as a battlefield. It looks like quite a number of mercenaries gained fame in this area." (Oiva)

While following Oiva who is leading him as if it's natural, Lauri looked around his surroundings restlessly. *I see, it will inevitably turn into a melee fight if one fights on this stage here*, he agrees. He had a feeling that even at this moment someone dangerous might leap out from the shadows of the bushes.

"Did Bertrand fight here as well?" (Lauri)

"I wonder about that... The folks who rose as nobles have all died in this place. Those wanting to become famous were killed and at times captured. That guy had a kind of a slave status, thus he might have not been active in this area." (Oiva)

Oiva speaks without hesitation of life and death on the battlefield. Supposing that it was a reality for those who hold spears and swords to wish for great achievements, for Lauri it was terrifying and also somewhat pointless. *Those are the lingering effects of a merchant's way of life which is a bit more unyielding. For example, even though the possessor of Chitoga City might be different before and after a war, that didn't mean that the city itself would be discarded. A fortress on the other hand will be covered in a sea of plants.*

(The brave has died, Salomon is dead as well. Only the kingdom is left now. Since that's the case, the dragon who tries to flap its wings from now on... Marko's fate is...?) (Lauri)

Even though Lauri felt a strange chill, he shook it off by tightening his mouth. While it may be true that he was betrayed by the scenery he anticipated, he considered it as cowardice to think badly about anything and everything.

"...However, it's just a remark, but it seems to be the nesting place of bandits, doesn't it?" (Lauri)

"Ain't that right. I think so as well. That's why I haven't used it." (Oiva)

The view suddenly opened up in a break in the woods.

Hundreds of tents have been systematically lined up and soldiers briskly moved in-between those. Having leveled the ground, many brand new facilities, made out of wood, have been erected. It seems like there are several water wells, too. The radiation of the heat of life towards the clear blue sky serves as testimony of the liveliness. Everywhere long, white flags are energetically fluttering in the wind.

It's the garrison of the Third Princess Paulina's royal guard unit.

The place Lauri aimed to arrive at in high spirits was designated to be in a location slightly away from the fortress, which was supposed to be in that region. *1500 soldiers gathered underneath the banner of the princess...* as a matter of fact those are Marko's troops, but only Lauri, Daniel and the leaders of the royal guard unit are aware of that.

"Wow, it's amazing. Won't it be a village, if there are fields as well?" (Lauri)

"There are fields. In a place a walk away we have created cultivated land and pasture. I believed I would come here as combat commander, but I have been working as a valuable smithing specialist in this place everyday. Why do I have to take care of swords and the same number of farming tools?" (Oiva)

"Hahaha, technology doesn't betray one. That's also true for dojos, right?" (Lauri)

"Of course. That's because bamboo-bundled swords are fun. Once I also tried to produce spears, those were kind of interesting as well." (Oiva)

The place the two headed towards while having a friendly chat is a building standing in the vicinity of the garrison's centre. It's the headquarters of the royal guard unit.

"Good work finishing the long journey. It's great that you came." (Marko)

The one who opened the door and ushered them in is the blue-eyed, black-haired beautiful boy. *He has the role of being the attendant of the leader in the royal guard unit, however whether one believes it just like that can be used as a kind of screening*, Lauri believes.

It's Marko. Having turned 13 years old, his limbs have extended, but as of yet they are still not finished growing. I don't know whether it's an eggshell or the wings of an angel, however his body hasn't stopped peeling off the fragments of his childishness. It's likely the same with his long hair or it's because he hasn't the time to cut it, Lauri continues to comment in his mind. *He can pass as lovely girl with those after all.*

"Mu... for some reason I feel a tinge of discomfort." (Marko)

"Oh! Having arrived on a trackless path, that's not me, Marko." (Lauri)

"That is... yes, that's true. Thank you very much. But then again we are pioneering a garrison in a place that didn't even have an office." (Marko)

“It looks like it has become something amazing. It would have been great if I had arrived slightly earlier as well though.” (Lauri)

“No, I’m thankful towards you who was able to handle it reliably over there. It’s not over yet either.” (Marko)

Due to Marko grinning while offering a chair, Lauri savored the slight feeling of bashfulness.

Among the comrades who made a vow, 3 of them are permanently stationed in this place. It’s Akseli, Oiva and Jarkko. Lauri has heard that Daniel lives his daily life by being exposed to the public attention in the capital as usual. However, as it seems that letters are being frequently exchanged, they can guess just how cornered he is. The offensive of marriage proposals seems to be terrific.

Besides, Bertrand has visited several times already as well, he heard. The criminal syndicate he is commanding possesses influence in all the territories in the vicinity without limiting itself to only the Helrevi Earldom. There’s also a boathouse run by their underlings in Chitoga City. I have no doubt that members of their organization are mixed in between the odd job labourers in this garrison as well.

And, the one who arrived one season later is Lauri. He was extremely busy with the management of the Hakkinen guard corps. It was difficult because the main military forces were transferred to the royal guard unit, including the commanders. The guard corps had an inclination to get reduced to begin with, but the structure of the organization was drastically altered as well. Only having the minimum required military forces, the current guard corps had lost the strength to carry out group battles in units of 100 soldiers. It mostly changed into a business-like organization.

Nevertheless, the one nominally in charge is Daniel and the one responsible for the practical application is Lauri, that hasn’t changed. Thus, even now as he came to the garrison, the influence of the guard corps regarding the distribution of goods within Helrevi Earldom has become big. And that is a Lauri’s role which Marko can certainly put to good use.

“At last we were able to obtain the permission from Marquis Maruyalanta. I will leave the decision about the improvement of the road from Chitoga City to this stronghold to you, Lauri. Once you finished that, I want you also to secure personnel for the sake of repairing the fortress.” (Marko)

“Okay, I will have to make various preliminary preparations and negotiations. I think I will be able to move right away in the future once I have the permit.” (Lauri)

“As expected. This is the permit.” (Marko)

What Marko presented on the desk is a scroll cylinder which had luxurious ornaments. The Maruyalanta territory which is located between the capital and the front is said to be the most prospering among all the territories due to its growth in commerce related matters. Its assets are reinforced by its expansion in the field of fine arts. Marquis Maruyalanta was known as zealous supporter of theater plays.

“I think we will reach the point of being able to easily move goods and soldiers as long as we can fix the road, but what will you do about the ships?” (Lauri)

“Ah, I requested a survey of a tributary fleet from Bertrand. I plan to leave depending on the results of that. Well, given that there’s still the difficulty of it being only me... it has to be decided with whom I go, I guess, though.” (Marko)

Marko who says that and leaks a small sigh doesn’t even direct those words at Lauri. *I recall the remark I heard in Kikomaru. He was always in conflict with the view he can see and the limbs he can move. That can’t be changed by polishing a plan either. Even if he wants to fight, his body won’t follow up on that. Marko is patiently enduring it while being frustrated, Lauri thinks. And, like that he has been raised as ‘Child that doesn’t enjoy being a child’.*

“At any rate... we were supplied with a truly amazing stronghold in a great place, weren’t we?” (Lauri)

Hearing about it and seeing it also changes the nature of the sighs. Those of Lauri might still be better as they are just fresh sighs out of interest. I wonder how many times the people of this garrison leaked a sigh.

The royal guard unit was established in this Asuria Kingdom in spring, but its administrative history was stacking up exception after exception since its beginning. Because its origin was the attempted assassination on the Third Princess, it might be unrelated to a normal administration from the onset... Lauri also thinks like that though.

First the acknowledgement ceremony was something crude as if being an informality

amongst informalities. Summoning only the leader, Akseli, to the royal palace, it finished as soon as he was told the words of the king. The guard members didn't receive the honour of a parade, There were no divine words from the princess and they didn't even receive any kind of blessing from the church. They were only given permission.

Next is the position in the military ranking at the moment when the princesses return to the capital. Now that the royal guard unit had been officially recognized, it's a custom to for it to be placed in a higher ranking order than the royal army, not to mention the various feudal armies, but because of the vague and unreasonable reason of matters concerning defense, they would march at the end of the line. Although, putting aside the leaders, the guard members felt shaken, Marko gave a single order in accordance to that.

"It has been assumed that the Imperial army will come from the north and that they will further proceed south towards the capital, however we are the ones who protect the end of the line. This is a seriously important role. We will strengthen the lookout of the vicinity by forming small cavalry units. We will display our abilities by not missing a single enemy scout. Our first mission is something magnificent. Besides Her Highness, Princess Paulina, we will protect all of Her Highnesses." (Marko)

All of the guard members who heard those details from Akseli who is the leader cheered up. It would be a quick military exercise and it would be an event that would solidify the awareness of the unit... it might also have been an act to demonstrate force towards someone.

Given the opportunity, all of the royal guard unit which arrived at the royal palace received the divine words from Paulina there. They were also promised booze and an inn close to the castle. And they received a single royal decree before 3 days passed.

"We must capitalize on our courage under the situation of the tension with Eberia Empire rising. We have been granted a fortress related to the king. Show your best performance underneath the name of Princess Paulina."

It was something said in a quite exaggerated way, but in short, the royal guard unit was stuffed into a fortress in a deserted remote area. Hearing that, Lauri grieved, however he corrected that thought once he has observed the actual site.

"Well, you can feel the entire might of 1500 people here, right?" (Oiva)

"Yes. That's not something I had anticipated, but it's a suitable number as far as taking

the shape of a stronghold.” (Lauri)

“We have to hurry with the repairs of the fortress, but... the increase in the number of personnel is...” (Oiva)

There were many other exceptions towards the royal guard unit, however the only dangerous one amongst them was the limitation in the number of people. Usually royal guard units and chivalric orders are organized as one military unit holding 3000 people. Even if the Third Princess’ royal guard unit started with 1500 soldiers, an increase in the number of personnel was scheduled, but they were limited to handle it with half a military unit of 1500 soldiers used during peace time. Problems with the burden on the national treasury were provided as reason. The maintenance costs of a royal guard unit are expenses of the national treasury.

It’s obviously done as harassment, Lauri judges. And it’s also a kind of harassment we cannot help but encounter. Though there are always ways to get things done no matter what is done by others, it will increase the danger on the battlefield if we are hindered to expand our war potential. If the danger increases, unexpected victims will appear. Lauri is afraid of that. The blade of the public isn’t a common way to lose someone important.

“It’s alright. There’s absolutely no problem.” (Marko)

It was Marko. His blue eyes are filled with a vibrant brightness even within the shaded room.

“Something like the restriction of peace times has no meaning on the battlefield. The present condition is that the front is located at the Plain of Wandering Calamity. The royal guard unit will be able to properly fight with 3000 men.” (Marko)

“Yea, well, it’s not like we will get attacked here... But, is it that simple to gather mercenaries?” (Lauri)

It’s probably because we met after a long time or because I saw the state of the fortress. Lauri wasn’t able to stop expressing his own anxiety to Marko. He also became well-acquainted with mercenaries because of his organizational management of the guard corps. It will be considerably difficult to prepare 1500 mercenaries we can rely on. All the more if it’s an urgent recruitment.

However, Lauri hears Marko laughing.

What Lauri hears is a happy, delightful timbre which is pleasant to the ears. And he felt a presence. He felt the breathing of a dragon as a person who is shown a view he won't be able to see with his own mediocre eyes.

"What are you saying? They have already been assembled. An exceptional 1500."
(Marko)

"Eh...? A-Ah, I see... e-eeh!?! You can even dispatch 1500!?" (Lauri)

"Yes. If I force it, I can send out a bit more, I guess?" (Marko)

I can see a flame leaking out from his graceful mouth... That's what Lauri feels. He listens.

"I can call at any time upon the best 1500 riders from the mounted bandits village."
(Marko)

Lauri trembled with a sudden shaking.

The majesty of a dragon was released.

Chapter 25

One should never underestimate that man

“Good grief, the princesses are hopeless. Each of them is doing something unreasonable.”

His breathing, which he grandly spit out, is tinged with the conceit of an upper noble and the faint scent of liquor. Without even feeling a single speck of slovenliness from his appearance of surrendering himself deeply into the legless chair, he shows the majesty of someone who bears a large responsibility. Daniel simply licked his sake cup without replying at all. He doesn't forgive the rash statement of the man in front of him.

Klaus Yurihalshira.

He is the head of the Marquis household standing at the summit of the nobles of the Asuria Kingdom. Respecting the social rules and traditions as the leader of the Four Marquis' and Six Earls, he is a man who honours the tradition of serving the royal family with his military arts. Having provided a large number of commissioned officers to the Royal Army from his family, he has nurtured a feudal army in his own territory, which is spreading in the capital's west, being called the strongest in the kingdom. You can even call him an individual who possesses the highest war potential in the kingdom, if you add the chivalric order under his jurisdiction.

However, on the other hand, he is also known as one to care about domestic affairs. Ascertaining the realization of the cease-fire agreement with the Eberia Empire and relinquishing his rank as Marshall of the Royal Army, he assisted in the restoration of the entire kingdom in addition to his own territory. Being seriously relied on by the king, he is a man who strived to be more diligent towards the king as leader of the nation than anyone else. That man is complaining while holding a sake cup.

“Eleonora-sama is far too close to the church. Margareta-sama is far too devoted to luxury. Moreover, even Paulina-sama is far too eccentric. It has reached the point that there's no calm person to quell the unrest.” (Klaus)

“Eccentric... it is?” (Daniel)

“You must have heard as well. About the matter with the Royal Guard. Its establishment is a privilege of royalty, but the timing is extremely bad. The current internal affairs are at a point where we must rally under one banner. The tension in the Plain of Wandering Calamity is rising as well. Why something like a Royal Guard...? Those are forces which will stimulate a civil war!” (Klaus)

His way of stating this in a provocative manner is similar to the threatening growls of a beast. *For a man who brags about his fiefdom being the wall of the kingdom, this more-than-a-half-year after the king has fallen sick was probably a nightmare for him, Daniel guesses.*

The first Princess, who was designated to carry the political power instead of the king, has pressed forward unyielding policies related to the distance between the state and the church. In front of her high-handedness, the Four Marquis's and Six Earls are in a state of being close to dividing into two factions. The fact that Marquis Yurihalshira intentionally belongs to the First Princess faction is actually nothing but him being afraid of the kingdom breaking apart. He is desperate to restrain the political chaos as it is something that will weight heavily on him.

What developed into something similar of ridiculing him is the case of the attempted assassination on the Third Princess. The obvious criminal is the commander of the territorial capital's infantry unit of the Helrevi feudal army, however it's apparent that there are others who designed the plan. The Eberia Empire or someone from within the kingdom... likely Marquis Yurihalshira is fearing the latter, Daniel assesses.

Sadly, while being the strongest at military affairs as the biggest noble household, the Marquis Yurihalshira household is similar to a large bear toying with small animals in regards to the conflicts at the royal court. Their personal connections and influences are too lopsided towards military authorities. Even Marquis Yurihalshira, who is probably ranking equally with the king in regards to matters of the front-line, is lacking the ability to deal with the state of affairs to the point of him currently entering the capital awkwardly.

He is a man who once even served as the highest general of the royal army being the kingdom's protector. If one talks about comrades in arms of the king, it's definitely Klaus Yurihalshira. It's a fact that the offensive efforts of the brave and Salomon could only be enacted due to his defensive assistance to begin with. That man is criticizing the princesses while holding his sake cup in one hand. Daniel is nothing more than a guest here.

(It's an irony, too. The man who shines the most brightly on the battlefield gripes about his unfamiliar job which is the furthest away from it. Moreover, his opponent is...)
(Daniel)

Daniel stifles the wry smile that formed on his lips. As one of the many consulting the legitimate heir of the Yurihalshira household, he has a position of being granted a room in their capital's residence. However, to the bitter end, his lord is Marko. Absorbing the information about the capital even at this very moment, he will convey all of the things he learned to Marko. Sending many scrolls to Helrevi Earldom as head of the Hakkinen guard corps, all of those are no more than fakes and the only person aware of that, Lauri, receives them.

"...Do you believe that the kingdom is still in danger of a civil war, Your Excellency?" (Daniel)

"Of course. Even the risk of becoming like that ruined country exists. Even now there's no reason to think that it won't happen." (Klaus)

"In that case, we must absolutely keep away the Royal Guard Unit from the capital..."
(Daniel)

"Yeah, that's only to be expected. That unit is essentially an army for the sake of fighting against the kingdom's nobles." (Klaus)

The one who imprisoned the Royal Guard Unit in a remote fortress is Marquis Yurihalshira. To be more accurate, advising 「Something like a member of royalty infringing upon the privileges of royalty is similar to a lion eating its own children」 to the First Princess who ordered the breakup of the unit, he changed her order into having them stationed in a deserted fortress.

That idea caused the First Princess stomach pains. By giving the Third Princess a military base, her face has been saved somehow. One might consider this as compromise, but at the end they disputed once again due to the First Princess proposing a restriction on the number of soldiers. This point passing is owed to the influence of the church...? Alongside the strengthening of his cautiousness, Daniel also sympathized with the opinion of Marquis Yurihalshira who approved the notion in the end.

"Besides, if they are placed at a visible location, Eleonora-sama won't be able to suggest something unreasonable again." (Klaus)

“The acceptance of the Holy Chivalric Order, is it?” (Daniel)

“Right. There is no way for me to deem such a thing acceptable.” (Klaus)

The Holy Chivalric Order is an independent combat unit of the church stationed at the Holy Island. It is formed of Holy Knights and their valets. They are a force feared for not choosing their methods if it's for the sake of their objectives. The killing of specific fishes in a pond which was declared as sacred ground, the matter of obeying to the Brave of Holiness and even burning a village, that was accused of heresy as well as murdering all of its inhabitants, from the elder to babies, they will do all of that without any hesitation.

At the time before the brave died, the Holy Chivalric Order dashed across the battlefields as a trustworthy ally in the kingdom. However, to the bitter end, that was only in accordance to the decree of the church. Even the refusals or acceptances of the kingdom's requests were decided by following what was convenient for the church. Depending on the situation they won't hesitate to turn their spears at the kingdom, if the empire's side suits them better.

The First Princess has aspired to invite that Holy Chivalric Order for quite a while. That's an idea even the warmongering nobles, who support her, shy away from. The current situation of the front-line being in the Plain of Wandering Calamity is largely different from the wretched situation in the past. Certainly, they might be powerful, however is it really alright for the kingdom to be dominated by the church' decision any more than this...? There's no way for that to be acceptable, is likely Marquis Yurihalshira's opinion.

“It's an awe-inspiring situation, but... despite being royalty, they are women and children. I can't allow them to grab the trigger for such stupid reasons such as obstinacy and vanity. It's also quite disturbing, really.” (Klaus)

Is that view of women, the display of some contempt, due to a slip of tongue? There are almost no differences in the rights of men and women in the Asuria Kingdom. For example, the First Princess will become a queen after inheriting the crown at some point in time. When she does so, her husband will only hold the position of prince consort. It's not like the ruler has always to be a man like it is for the the Emperor of the Eberia Empire.

However, in regards to military affairs, both countries are reversed. While female officers and Knights do exist in the Eberia Empire, there isn't anything like women wearing a

sword at their sides, unless it's at the level of a maid officer, in Asuria Kingdom. And, Marquis Yurihalshira is essentially a soldier. Him building up such view of women is likely caused by those reasons, Daniel suspects.

“By the way, Baron Hakkinen, how do you view Earl Helrevi?” (Klaus)

“Ha... with all due respect, as for my evaluation of him, isn't he an honest person who is deeply loyal to the kingdom?” (Daniel)

“Hmm, that's true. I think so too. The Earl has aspects of valuing principles and regulations more than time and circumstances. From time to time that will create adversaries as well. It resulted in building up various opponents this time, but...” (Klaus)

Is the pain mixed in his voice because he recognised the same awkwardness he possesses?

Earl Mathias Helrevi has been ordered into house arrest for the meantime due to his culpability of the attempted assassination of the Third Princess occurring in his territory. Because he was a man who endeavoured in his government affairs by secluding himself in the territory's castle to begin with, it's basically an acquittal. However, nominally it's correct that his honour has been damaged. Marquis Yurihalshira was distressed over that.

Although Marquis Yurihalshira drew the conclusion that the inauguration of the Royal Guard Unit was eccentric, he likely had large sympathy towards the sentiments of Earl Helrevi who assisted in that, too. It's Marquis Yurihalshira's justice to protect the royal family with troops.

That's why Daniel nods and opened his mouth to talk,

“Thoughtless people can be found everywhere. The same can also be said for gossiping people. Things like rumours will vanish before long.” (Daniel)

There are some who also declared with certainty that Earl Helrevi is a man who gets cornered by rumours. However, there was some truth to those words as well. That's because it's as Daniel has expected. *The nobles are living in a sweet dream. Don't they want to be surrounded by countless, ephemeral-like dreams rather than clinging to a single dream? Something like the strength to continue by resolutely limiting it to a single dream; they don't have it in them to do that.*

“Uh huh... that’s right. I wish that you are correct, too.” (Klaus)

The nodding of Marquis Yurihalshira seems somewhat sad. His worries have probably piled up after all, Daniel assesses. He isn’t a person who shows that on the surface, but people are simple animals who always need a certain level of reassurance. That’s why they dream. If they could continue to dream of better times to come, people will be able to last more resiliently... After thinking that, Daniel feels a tinge of compassion towards Marquis Yurihalshira.

The dream of Marquis Yurihalshira will end very soon... the remaining years of the king aren’t many anymore.

Marquis Yurihalshira, who has visited the king in the inner part of the royal palace, has seen the king’s complexion growing worse each time he went there. He is at his wit’s end due to the end which is gradually, steadily and irreversibly approaching. In the not so far future he will have to part with the sole dream he was determined to uphold, with the dream he continued to protect throughout the war. The person, who is gazing at the setting sun and chewing his lips, is definitely Marquis Yurihalshira.

“The outbreak of war with the empire has entered the countdown phase, but...” (Daniel)

His shoulders reacted with a twitch to Daniel’s statement.

“Your Excellency, will you dispatch your chivalric order to the front-line?” (Daniel)

For Marquis Yurihalshira himself, who resigned from his post in the royal army, there’s no other method but to dispatch the chivalric order under his jurisdiction if he wants to influence the outbreak of war in the Plain of Wandering Calamity. His feudal army has been stationed as a shield to protect the royal capital.

“...Lukas, huh?” (Klaus)

“Yes. Rather than at a large-scale battle, isn’t now a good time for him to practice if he is to experience his first campaign?” (Daniel)

Lukas is a 13 years old boy who is the legitimate child of the Marquis household as the son of Marquis Yurihalshira. He is the person whom Daniel serves as one of many consultants. Oddly being at the same age as Marko, this was also something of great interest to Daniel. He distinctly comprehends the “specialness” of his lord.

Lukas is a docile, excellent child. He is wise as well. Someday he will likely possess a splendid personality as head of the Yurihalshira household, he is able to predict. If that wasn't the case, he wouldn't have entered as one of Marko's chosen options. However... it's only that. He is nothing more but a common 13 years old who is acting befitting of his age.

That's why he gave that advice.

In the present Plain of Wandering Calamity small units of both armies are just barely executing tactics. They often encounter each other, but they stay away from each other without fighting. Such events are repeating over and over. Above not wanting to bear the responsibility of being the bringer of war, they will lose the moral cause if it's their side who makes the first move... no, they would grant an easy-to-understand moral cause to their opponent.

Also, assuming that war broke out, it's not like it will turn into a large-scale engagement right away. First there will probably be frequent small scale battles to gauge the war potential of either side. As it will be nothing more than skirmishes, live experiences can be found there. Daniel has suggested to send Lukas to the front for those.

"It's something I wanted to consider, but... hmm... I feel that it's unexpected for this matter to come from you, Sir. If I had to say, then I thought that you were a person more involved with domestic affairs." (Klaus)

That impression is something Daniel imprinted intentionally. There are many militaristic people around Marquis Yurihalshira and he himself holds a position of suppressing the rampaging of the warmongering nobles. *It will be instead better to highlight my knowledge in regards to the lifestyle of the citizens and my experiences regarding the distribution of goods rather than my military prowess in the subjugation of the mounted bandits for the sake of winning favours with him...* He made such judgement.

As result of that bearing fruit, Daniel is currently here. He has been appointed to a responsible post by Marquis Yurihalshira exceeding the restriction called consultant of the legitimate child. However, the setting here is for him to take one step forward.

"At the time of battle, a chivalric order won't be excluded. But, it will be different if it's sounding out." (Daniel)

“There’s some truth to that. Those mixed into a chivalric order who experience their first battle are the most unreliable ones as a force to settle a battle. Seeing that each battle is also an individual encounter, won’t it also largely influence how they will fight?” (Klaus)

All of a sudden Marquis Yurihalshira talks full of vigour. He realizes that he is unconsciously stroking the upper left arm. *Having received a severe wound in the midst of the war, a scar remains as he continued to fight without retreating despite his injury,* Daniel heard. *It’s probably throbbing.*

“I see... he is 13 years old, too, isn’t he? It’s a bit early, but it might be a good opportunity for him to experience his first campaign.” (Klaus)

Daniel suddenly remembers the summer 3 years ago because of the words “13 years.” *The agitation and tension when I fought the mounted bandits in the hilly area at night...* and in the end he also thinks about the situation of the person who was the boss of the mounted bandits. *At that time Marko was 10 years old.*

“Okay, let’s go with that. I will dispatch the chivalric order. However, there is something I want to request from you, Sir, who started this. Since this will definitely concern Lukas’ life, you won’t be able to stay unrelated anymore either.” (Klaus)

“Ha... even if this incompetent me can only serve as shield, I shall protect Lukas-sama’s body with my life.” (Daniel)

Although Daniel only gave the obvious answer, the response was loud laughter.

“Your Excellency...?” (Daniel)

“Don’t say stupid things, Baron Hakkinen. This isn’t the made-up story of your father and elder brother, Sir. No matter who it is, if they stand on the battlefield, the battlefield will be an ordeal for them. You die at the time of death. Lukas, you, and everyone else is the same. One must not enter the battlefield if one wants to protect. You defend in order to not enter it. After entering it, try to be someone who fights together with your allies. If you don’t do that, you will only die, Sir.” (Klaus)

A force, he didn’t have until now, was released by Marquis Yurihalshira and pressed upon Daniel. Already not being the man who leaked sighs and complaints, currently there’s no one other than the general, who will command all the armies, in this place.

(This is the person called commander-in-chief of the kingdom's defense, huh...!?)
(Daniel)

It was the first time for Daniel to be basked in this pressure. It was his wish to see the true worth of Marquis Yurihalshira. However, he isn't overwhelmed by it. That doesn't mean that he is able to oppose him with calibre as commander. He is able to bear it because he is superior in just one aspect. *It's because of the strength of that one aspect. It's because of his future anticipations due to that one aspect.*

It's a dream. A large dream with the name Marko.

The dream, Daniel settled with, will certainly rise into the sky soon. *As if dawn would lose to sunset!*

"I'm humbled to have received your teaching. It's a experience of opening my ignorant eyes. I shall offer you my gratitude." (Daniel)

Daniel performs a courteous bow. His smile leaked out naturally. Marquis Yurihalshira smiles again as well. Daniel addressed it to Marko in his mind. *This man is strong. There's no mistake that he will become the biggest hurdle if he becomes our enemy.*

"...So, what's your command to me?" (Daniel)

"You have a disposition of jumping to a hasty conclusion, Sir. It was a request, not an order, but... seeing your current look, I changed my mind a bit. I want you to depart to the front together with Lukas after all, Sir. It would be best to make my request after you return." (Klaus)

Due to Marquis Yurihalshira showing a somewhat unreadable smile, Daniel didn't have left anything but to perform a bow once more. *As expected, it's difficult to despise this man. This time's plan had a risk similar to going across a naked blade...* Thinking like that, Daniel gulps down his saliva quietly.

In the future it would result in Daniel cocking his head in puzzlement.

The marriage proposals, which fluttered in frequently until then, soon completely stopped arriving. Even the invitations to gorgeous balls decreased. In contrast, the dining together with military personnel, which has connections to the Yurihalshira household, increased. He thought back whether that was only to be expected during the days of preparing for the departure towards the front.

He forgot. Marquis Yurihalshira has 2 children. One is Lukas, the heir. The other one is his elder sister, Amalia. In the Asuria kingdom it's the custom to view the eldest child, without differentiating between men and women, as the heir, but going by Marquis Yurihalshira's will, the eldest child, Amalia, was removed from being the heir for the sake of marrying into another house.

A certain encircling net was slowly completed around Daniel.

Chapter 26

They are that kind of people

“Looks like a war is going to start again... how unpleasant, how unpleasant.”

“What’s so unpleasant ’bout it? I had hoped for that. Something like the empire ain’t allowed to exist.”

“Right, right. Thinking of how many of my family were killed by them. They are murderers!”

“The imperial soldiers killed brave-sama. Those imperial soldiers were killed by the evil man. That evil man was killed by the kingdom.”

“Ooh, haven’t you said something nice there. Just as you said, the strongest are us without a doubt.”

The cattle is making sounds. While eating their fodder, they are sprouting useless noise. Even if a poet feels gracefulness in the voice of the wind, they won’t show any interest in the barking of this mob. However, the phenomenon of either world is definite, or rather, this side has a deep flavour of truth... The man, who is drinking from a sake cup at a stall, listened to the gossip of the people from within his hood while being by himself.

Bertrand of the Green Cloth. He is currently sitting at the rear side of the hustle and bustle in Chitoga City.

“They are late, aren’t they? It would have been great if they attacked far earlier.”

“Hey! You are going too far! Our houses and cities were tattered.”

“That’s the frustrating aspect. Although we won, we didn’t raid even a single of their cities.”

“Guess so. Though I don’t think it can be helped. The evil man was there after all.”

“That’s it. If we didn’t take it out on the evil man to begin with, we wouldn’t be able to

live peacefully.”

This area, where dozens of stands are lining up next to each other, gradually draws people in the evening and is engulfed in the heat of people and meals once the sky becomes dark. Lights are making people and the plates they eat from stand out here and there, but those are blotted out by the night making it a dim sphere. Not accepting the darkness and yet being unable to completely refuse it, it's an ambiguous district which insists on its vitality.

“Is the church our ally this time, too?”

“Well that's only natural, I guess. Why would they be our enemy? We defeated the evil man, didn't we?”

“No, but you know... there isn't a brave with us, this time, I mean. Why isn't there one though?”

“That is, you... isn't that because braves don't appear that easily?”

“Princess-sama ended up marrying as well. Well, there are two more though, Princess-sama's that is.”

Everyone is tossing out words intended for anyone, huh? While being aware that they are a part of their own country, is that for the sake of their country or is it a country for their sake? Even while investigating the answer to that very interesting thought from within the timbre of the surroundings... Bertrand smiles. There is a joy filling his heart.

It's a nice atmosphere. This is an exceedingly nice mood.

Rather than hesitation they are choosing vigour. Society has a feverish desire to start running any time soon. Bertrand knows that passion very well. It's an intoxicant disease that reduces one's thoughts and outlook to what one desires for themselves.

“Ah, damn it! Just when is it going to start, I wonder?”

“Indeed, indeed. I'm itching for it!”

“This time it definitely our turn to invade them!”

It's a fever. The illness of belligerence. Predicting their victory and desiring violence, they

dream of overrunning their enemy believing in their own justice. They are likely already savouring the feeling of omnipotence. That's the way it is. Bertrand cannot bear it. That overestimation of their ability will certainly result in war!

There was someone who approached him from behind with their feet making no sounds. Even though he notices it, he doesn't react. Bertrand wets his lips with a free drink. Showing only their profile to Bertrand, someone peeked into the stand and murmured in a low voice 「Everything's arranged」. He doesn't give an answer. Simply putting a nickel coin on the tabletop, he stood up.

As if making sure to receive the illumination and heat of the bonfire in his back, Bertrand walks into the darkness of an alley. The night's wind is already tinged with coolness. However, quickly advancing without hesitation into the turbulent air brought about by the wind, he stopped once a single building entered his view.

It's a wooden, two-storied building. Light is swaying at the house's frontage with its brown and rusted façade. What are they selling in a place that hasn't any proper pedestrian traffic? The old signboard is displaying the store's name of so-and-so, but it's difficult to discern between dirt and characters in this darkness. It has an appearance similar to crouching due to the darkness filled with dangers.

There is someone lurking in the shadows stretching from the sides of the door while erasing their presence. It's not common to have a completely black attire. What they are wearing at their waist is a blade for killing people. But, that's also the same for Bertrand. It's really an unreliable long sword compared to his favourite large sword, but the naked blade, which appeared to be thin, long and slender, reflects a cold intent to murder. It's single-edged.

Giving a nod towards the shadow, the shadow silently opens the door. A green gale blew inside.

The man, who was immersed in the account book, had round eyes and a round nose as well as mouth, but before he squeezed out the inhaled breath, his head is cut off with a *splat*. A back is visible in the kitchen. There is a presence in the toilet. No sooner than him having identified that, two people in complete black come rushing in from behind Bertrand.

While listening to the outcome being decided in his back according to the sounds, he ascends the stairs. The door at the side was opened. The head, which just peeked out

from there, drops to the ground as is. Making sure to shift around it and step over it while it's gushing out dark redness, he quickly stepped into the room.

"Wh-!? Y-You are"

Severing the arm which grasped the scabbard of a sword, he cuts open their throat by overturning the katana. Kicking that which had become no more than moaning and wheezing sounds, he cleared away the sword's point which came lunging from his flank. Did the slight response mean that they lost a finger or was that prevented by having attacked immediately? It turns into a fierce crossing of swords.

"You bastard... of the Sand Polishing Shop!"

Returning only one glance at the man's remark, he knocks down the man's sword with the guard. He prepares his body so that he won't step on the flesh-coloured things being scattered around. Although the man came grabbing at him with the hand which was missing a finger, he mowed down at his belly in order to make him pass out. He forsakes that, which started to mumble something about giving up. The hand affixed by the blade's point transmitted a heat as it suffered something red dripping down.

"A-awa-wawaa"

He looks down on that skinny man who wore a habit. With his butt appearing to be tied to the ground, he tries to desperately retreat his body with both arms. He seems to have given up on using both his feet as they aren't reliable. *He will probably even use his jaw in the end*, Bertrand anticipated with a little admiration. The attachment to life turns into dread towards death.

"I wonder who you are. You don't look like a person of the Ship's Arrival Shop either."
(Bertrand)

Without waiting for an answer, he looks back at the man, who still groans with a voice that isn't one... and the one who has his finger and various other things scattered around on the floor, and cuts off their heads. The sounds which came from the direction of the entrance have already become silent as well. Nothing can be heard from outside anymore either.

"A person from the church, eh?" (Bertrand)

Once his interest was aroused, the skinny man tried to nod yes with his head with

enough force to make it seem as if it was about to be torn off.

“I see, a person from the church, huh? In that case let me ask you, why are you in this place? Do you know who this man is?” (Bertrand)

With the sword's point, which is painted red, he hinted at the person who was the owner of that red. This period of time spent tonight crossing swords; that meeting has already finished with both dead and living. However, Bertrand knew this man well.

The Ship's Arrival Shop... publicly they are water transportation merchants of Chitoga City doing reputed work as river-craft transportation on the eastern and western river branches. But behind the scenes they are laying waste to the Eastern Dragon River as river pirates. It's a violent organisation with that job being their core business. There are several similar lawless organisations, but even among them the Ship's Arrival Shop is extremely ferocious. Their boss is this man.

“I-I, him who has given in to temptation, broken the laws, as mission of the church... hii!?”

Bertrand interrupted the started speech by shaking off the blood of his sword. Next he takes out a cloth and wipes the blade with it. While wiping, he squats down next to the skinny man.

“If you tell me an official story, I will have to kill you. Since I'm a devout man... I'm unable to stand the fact that injustice was committed in front of an apostle of god. If you are to chase after me officially, there's no choice but to pretend that all of it didn't happen. It's something regrettable.” (Bertrand)

While he is examining the condition of his sword's blade, he makes that statement as he also watches the other party across the blade. Even as he looks, the skinny man shivered and became pathetically pale. *That kind of person is weak to pain. Even if a tiger hides its skin under its fur, its body under that fur has a soft skin and is sensitive to pain and cold.* Bertrand suddenly remembered his old days. *Foxes are everywhere.*

“I-It's different... right, the truth is different!”

“Hoo, it's different, huh?” (Bertrand)

“That's right, it's different. I came to negotiate with him... with the pirate him!”

Within this room filled with the stench of iron rust, the skinny man cried.

The church has tried to form a connection with the river pirates. Since the front lines are supported through both, the land route and the water route, in regards to goods and soldiers, they want to expand their influence on one of them eventually. The church is aware of their influence even though they are river pirates, but if you combine it with the political strength of the church, it will give birth to an unexpectedly large effect. It will become possible for them to take hold of the war's framework.

(It will be possible to seal off the fortresses on the inland's water side... or even drying them out.) (Bertrand)

Appropriately ignoring the voice which is crying with high-pitched peeping sounds, Bertrand was reminded of the blue eyes which should be feared. *The living god, who is looking far ahead and predicting all of it, has talked about all of the details, which are right now mentioned in front of me, in advance while even depicting the inner details and how it will proceed beyond that. It's presumptuous to confirm it at this time.* Bertrand is simply waiting.

He simply had a secret feeling of satisfaction. He has personally experienced that his own work was useful for his master's foresight.

In the first place it was just by chance as Bertrand was travelling to search for Jikil Rosa.

Bertrand, who widely traveled the kingdom's territory in his pursuit after her footprints, experienced a single abnormality. A hint of his own native land, which he vaguely notices in things like the behaviour and the accent in speech... an uncountable number of imperial people are living within the kingdom. Moreover they aren't slaves from the previous war. Bertrand, who looked for such slaves possessing the same past of being slaves, was able to clearly perceive it for that reason.

They are illegal immigrants. Furthermore, they are people who came in after the "Festival of the Holy Flame." He understands that from the way they live their lives.

The land, which connects the Asuria Kingdom and the Eberia Empire, is only the Plain of Wandering Calamity. The front-line armies of both countries aren't stupid enough to miss strangers crossing there. Having said that, further up north than the Plain of Wandering Calamity, a small part of the demonic domain "Impure Illusionary Forest"

in the Northwest of the continent is extending. Beyond that part there is the steep, wall-like Heaven's Boundary Mountain Range. In the south there is ocean called "Purple Cloud Sea", which is also a demonic domain, and it doesn't allow any ships to sail through its territory.

If one talks about the sole way to enter both countries, it's the Holy Island. That island, which is owned by the church and lies south of the Purple Clouds Sea, secures a sea route connecting the South's of both countries via the eastern and western capes.

However, with there only being one special ship which was obtained by the miracle of a "saint", there are many restrictions except sailing around the island. Not only is it unable to cross the Purple Clouds Sea, which is the shortest route from one cape to the other, but depending on the situation at sea, even the long route is difficult as well.

Even so, it's not impossible. Only the church is able to transport people without both countries noticing. And if there is a part telling those illegal immigrants to gather military intelligence, one is able to clearly see the church's ulterior motive.

"The church doesn't want the kingdom to win." (Marko)

No one was surprised when they heard those words from Marko. It's something close to 5 years before now. The location was the conference room of the Hakkinen guard corps in the territorial capital of the Helrevi territory. All of the leaders were together as they took an oath as retainers. Bertrand was there as well. Marko, who was 8 years old at that time, came to the territorial capital from Kikomaru in a hurry. Right after he reported on the details and failures of the investigation trip, he was given an urgent order.

Those were terrible words.

The church, which rescued the kingdom in the previous war, was strongly and largely expanding its influence in the kingdom thanks to its close relationship with the First Princess at that time, just like it is now as well. In these several years the church's influence has only increased. The brave faith has been widely circulated among the people. Most recently there are even rumours about reinforcements by the Holy Knights, but... Marko has consistently drawn the conclusion of the church's situation. Whether they are an existence affecting the war. Whether they are an existence that should stay neutral.

That's why, Bertrand thinks. Marko continued to always act without standing out until now, however that was not only because of the influential people of the kingdom but also in order to hide from their eyes from the church, wasn't it? Since that's the case, the matter of miracle investigators will stand out as the foremost reason, but it might not only be that. There might be other concerns.

I don't know. I don't know, but, while not knowing I enjoy being able to serve him without hesitation.

The reason is that Bertrand isn't a retainer but a believer. *And I'm also an apostle. It's my highest pleasure if I can serve as eyes and ears as well as hands and feet of my own master. Even if I'm used as disposable tool, my delight won't change. I want to be useful to him.* Bertrand's life is fulfilled by the joy of devotedly offering all of himself.

"...Is that so? I see. It's a saving thought for me to be able to hear your real intentions as well." (Bertrand)

Facing him with a mouth depicting a content smile, Bertrand addressed the skinny man. He sheaths the completely clean sword into the scabbard and suggests,

"Won't you join hands with me?" (Bertrand)

Once he gave a sign with his hand, 5 to 6 completely black men enter the room. The skinny man looks at the black and white in their eyes. Bertrand presses him to answer with the words he had prepared.

"I'm running a business as shipping agent called Sand Polishing Shop, but actually I'm the boss of that place who is accompanied by many such troops. We are expanding our business in various ways. It's the same for us coming here tonight, I have heard from a small friend that the boss of the Ship's Arrival Shop is trying to be the strongest among the pirates... well, that's why we did this." (Bertrand)

Sitting on something that quickly loses its heat, he smiles.

"Do you understand? I'm also talking about my real intentions. Isn't this a chance for both of us? The church wants the pirates who are able to operate in this city. I'm deeply involved with both, the eastern and western river branches as well as the southern main stream, and want to make a profit. How about it? I think that we can share the profits." (Bertrand)

Bertrand appeases the skinny man, whose eyes have selfishness, relief and greed flickering within them even while they are darting about restlessly, with another remark from the bottom of his heart.

“It’s alright. Although we look like this, we are deeply religious. It’s to an extent that you can even call us religious fanatics.” (Bertrand)

He smiles with his lips taking the shape of a crescent moon.

A dark contract was established here. Without talking any further the hand, which represents the church in its desire to expand its influence in the underworld, and the hand, which was adorned with a green cloth, grasped each other tightly. The hand is connected to the arm, the arm is connected to the shoulder and on top of the neck a green glint is glittering in the eyes.

Bertrand can hear Marko’s voice.

“There are two overland routes, the one going through the Helrevi territory or the one going through the Yurihalshira territory, heading towards the front-line from the kingdom’s centre, but the former is completely in our hands and that man won’t give the latter to church enthusiasts easily. Since that’s the case, only the water route remains, but Chitoga City has an important position in the water transportation. It’s only natural for the Asuria Kingdom, but the Eberia Empire used it as well before. Even after the Empire withdrew by moving the front, there should be lawless organisations left behind in what one can call their remains. And those will be the pirates who disturb the transportation in the most radical ways. Since the church will likely try to contact them, aim at them and crush them. And then take their place. Your name and career will probably become useful as well.” (Marko)

He is pleased.

Bertrand came to hold a strong clout in Chitoga City.

Chapter 27

Alright, the war has started

The armour and helmet, which were created matching his size, are heavy, or rather, hot. He is tasting the feeling of steel being glued onto him. Feeling as if he himself has somehow transformed into someone gallant, the boy is looking up to the sky in a grandiose manner. The white clouds pasted on the high, transparent blue look just like they have been drawn with light and nimble brushwork. He becomes fraught with emotion.

“Young master, you have straightened up too much. You will fall down.”

The name of the one, who fixed his own grip on the reigns in panic, is Lukas Yurihalshira. He, at a tender age of 13 years, is the legitimate child of the Marquis Yurihalshira household which reigns as the highest-ranking noble family of the kingdom. His face, which still has childishness remaining and is enclosed by the helmet with its face protector opened, flushes.

“What admirable advice, Knight Leader. Falling off the horse just before heading out for my first battle would make me too ashamed to meet father.” (Lukas)

“Don’t be so eager. It is definitely vital for you to return from your first battle without injury. It’s the same with horse-riding. First you have to get used to the view of a battle.” (Knight Leader)

“I got it. I believed I knew that, but it looks like I had felt a bit pressured.” (Lukas)

Correcting his posture on the horse’s back with a snap, Lukas surveyed his surroundings. The battle flag endowed with the seal of the Four Swords Square is flying in the autumn sky. The spears are standing close together and the sharpness of their blades is gleaming. The clattering of the dignified armours and the champing of the warhorse’s horseshoes is forming the timbre of the army. All of them are expressing their unity by wearing an armour overcoat with the same vibrancy of patterns and colours.

(I don’t understand the feeling of the battlefield’s heroes, father has talked about. This

is...!)(Lukas)

Lukas is meaninglessly under pressure once again. And once again he was chided by the Knight Leader about derailing the speed of his horse. The commander of this group is the Knight Leader. Lukas has promised to follow his orders.

This is the Sword Corner* Knight Order affiliated to the Yurihalshira household. With the knights numbering 600, all of them have the appearance one would recognize as that of heavy cavalry. Each of them has one light cavalry rider, as subordinate knight, and 3 infantry soldiers, carrying a shield, a spear and a bow respectively, following. In total they consist of 600 heavy cavalry, 600 light cavalry and 1.800 infantry soldiers. It's a combat unit possessing 3.000 people.

To be more precise, currently it's 3.000 people and 2.

"I can't settle down unless I calm myself... Sensei, what should I do?" (Lukas)

"It's good to ponder about what you ate this morning and what you would eat for lunch, I guess. It will lessen the feeling of this being a dream." (Daniel)

The one who answered smoothly is Baron Daniel Hakkinen. Being one of Lukas' consultants, he is a man who teaches him the way of the nobility by lectures that are different from the others. He is the son, and also the younger of the brothers, of the former Viscount Hakkinen, who's known for his name in the hero's legend. And he is the leader of the Hakkinen guard corps which is widely known for their courageousness in the Helrevi Earldom.

"The meals, huh...? I see, that's certainly calmed me down. Which reminds me, I still don't know about the thing called field ration." (Lukas)

"I think it's interesting to experience the taste of something like qwamp meals. It has a nice consistency while being chewed." (Daniel)

"Qwamp, eh? As someone who is a knight, there might exist a reason to eat the same food as your favourite horse. I'd like to try it out." (Knight Leader)

Sensei is somewhat different from the others after all, Lukas groans within his mind. Three years have already passed since he started to live in the mansion, but even more than the knowledge he taught, he wittily answers every single thing, Lukas greatly admires. His perspective differs from the other nobles and soldiers.

He isn't a person who talks about himself much. Even that is unusual, too, Lukas thinks, but he has reached a single conclusion after analyzing various statements from him. Namely, the insides of the man called Baron Daniel Hakkinen are like a steel core. You might call it conviction. That's why he is able to stay independent without being influenced by his environment. Isn't that also the reason why his perspectives and remarks are something unique?

Lukas also likes that his attitude isn't servile and flattering. One can say that this is a common and good aspect of a man descended from military families. However, in contrast to them, who are the embodiment of that by being loyal as soldiers, Daniel seems to somehow have an unidentifiable purity. Lukas wonders whether that's not his motive. *An example why it should be so is Daniel's unnecessary strength... that causes him to be somehow overlapping with the figure of my father, Klaus.*

That's probably why, Lukas nodded within his helmet.

Lukas has five elder sisters, but there's no mistake that all of them are yearning for Daniel... at least Lukas has confidence in that. For him that was a delight. His home is that of his deceased mother. When it comes to hoping for his elder sisters' happiness, Lukas prides himself on desiring it the most in the world, even surpassing his father.

Amalia Yurihalshira. 18 years old. Originally she, as the eldest child, should have become the legitimate child, but because of his father Klaus' will she isn't allowed to succeed the Yurihalshira household. Lukas has various thoughts regarding his father having decided like this. But, he believed that it was a move to not allow Amalia, with her humble personality, to be plunged into the dispute over the inheritance of a powerful household.

She is graceful. She is gentle. She is modest. The word lady fits her precisely. Smiling at the joy of others as if it is her own, her way of life is to naturally put priority on someone else rather than herself. She is as brilliant as something holy. Such a her should become the happiest person in the world. If such a her yearns for someone, everybody should bless her romance... Lukas clenches the bridles tightly. And he got cautioned by the Knight Leader because his horse decelerated. Lukas reflected.

"No matter what, it's useless. There's too many various things agitating me. Though that doesn't mean at all that I'm here with a feeling of taking a picnic." (Lukas)

"...How about trying to word everything out to your heart's content? If you keep it to

yourself, it will just get stronger.” (Daniel)

“I see, there’s truth in that. Sensei, I’d like to make my elder sister happy.” (Lukas)

“Well...?” (Daniel)

“It’s really not like I’m fooling around here. I’d like elder sister to always smile brightly.” (Lukas)

“Lukas-sama’s safety is definitely Amalia-sama’s biggest desire.” (Daniel)

“Ah! You could say that, too. Yea, that’s right, it’s something important.” (Lukas)

Lukas recalled about Amalia coming out to see him off. Her appearance as she tried to bravely smile and cheer on Lukas despite feeling uneasy and painful. Her eyes were tear-choked.

“That’s because it’s a battlefield, this place here.” (Daniel)

Once he turned his gaze ahead of the front of the majestic knight order, a plain is extending as far as the eyes can see. Viewing the ridgeline of the Heaven’s Boundary Mountain Range in the north at his right side, he expects the Purple Sea to be far in the south on his left side. *What were the countless thousands of ten thousands officers and soldiers thinking while fighting here? What did they regret as they perished here?* Lukas took a deep breath. The bottom of his abdomen is filled with power.

(I have come here. Finally. To see what my own worth is...!) (Lukas)

This place is the Plain of Wandering Calamity.

This vast plain, spreading between the Asuria Kingdom and the Eberia Empire, is a battlefield where countless battles between both countries unfolded for a long time. They have to overtake this soil to invade into the other country. Either side won’t permit defeat. After losing in the massive clash of armies on this soil once, the Asuria Kingdom was exposed to the danger of destruction.

Firmly stepping over such humiliation from 10 years ago with military boots, we try to correct it by painting it in another colour... and advance.

Currently Lukas’ 3002 are marching towards the west in the Plain of Wandering

Calamity. They can't see any other units in the surroundings, but there's no doubt that they are likewise marching onwards in a not so distant place. If they dispatch a scout light cavalry unit, they will come back with exchanged information from any of the friendly light cavalry units. This is a patrol duty for all of the force's units.

Advancing to the designated battlefield while keeping in touch with the other units, they would kill as many as possible if they encountered the enemy.

It's not the kind of situation for doing something unreasonable, but there's no necessity to be idle and overlook them either. While fighting without overreaching themselves, they will measure the enemy. Each unit has been granted tactical freedom. It's completely different from the threatening carried out before. Both countries have already crossed that line.

The cease-fire agreement has been revoked. Both countries have entered a state of war.

However, the motive for the outbreak of war was something quite foolish, Lukas heard.

It's merely one arrow. It'd been a stand-off between fellow small units, which had become a competition of willpower to see which side would shift their position first as result of their plans. Such incidents sprang forth in various places in the Plain of Wandering Calamity at that period. One might say that the reason for the outbreak of the war is the barrel filled to the brim with water finally spilling over, but you can't deny that the situation, where one arrow was released, isn't the deciding factor for the outbreak of war either.

That arrow, which a soldier of the Asuria Kingdom launched for the sake of threatening, whether skilfully or clumsily, grazed the nose tip of a warhorse from the Eberia Empire. It was probably an injury which caused only a bit of blood to flow, but with that the horse reared up. Throwing off the soldier who was mounting it, it ran off ahead in the direction of the kingdom's soldier. Kicking down and trampling over a single infantryman, it galloped away towards somewhere else.

The imperial soldier, who fell off the horse, hit a bad place and lost his life. The kingdom's soldier, who was kicked down, was also hit in a bad place while being stepped on and couldn't be saved anymore. One arrow stole the lives of 2 people. Due to this fact, someone said 「Two dead for one arrow」. The meaning of that saying is that an unfortunate accident leads to an unforeseen catastrophe. Lukas considers the

one, who said it, to be imprudent.

Of course, both countries didn't have any intention to let it finish as an unfortunate accident. Blaming the kingdom for having fired that arrow, the empire's side announced the revocation of the cease-fire agreement without prior notice, alongside mourning over the death of a single cavalryman. The kingdom's side sneered at the inexperience of the imperial army in training its warhorses, which would rear up by a single arrow where it's not even clear whether it hit or not. Thus they insisted that the kingdom's soldier was killed by a runaway warhorse. And that it was the side of the imperial army, albeit just a horse, who violated the cease-fire agreement.

Speaking figuratively about the developments after that, it should be like a snow ball rolling down a hill's road and rising in size or like a small fire spreading its flames all at once. Lukas listened to the change of circumstances while feeling a tinge of dread. *Casualties were increasing between the small units at the front-line by incidents that didn't seem to be accidental... before long it led into a roaring for war proclamation in both countries. It was the outbreak of the war.*

Lukas considered that to be regretful. That's because he thought that they should create a proclamation, which is more fair and square, for the beginning of a war. The style of this time's beginning doesn't fit that. He remembered its paltriness to be completely like letting go of the reins controlling a raging, wild dog.

But, even so, Lukas believes that war is something to be fought bravely.

He considers it as his proud duty. *The task of enriching the territory and having many people live there as a Marquis household is the duty and responsibility of a feudal lord and there's nothing above that, Lukas believes. Why does a Marquis household have that position or why are they given the privilege to voice their opinion in front of the king... isn't that a reason for conflict? Won't the claim for large privileges be justified by fighting more vigorously than anyone, and by showing more bravery in combat than anyone else? Isn't it the Yurihalshira household's obligation to continue being accepted like that? Isn't that a matter of honour?*

Lukas turns around. His body wrapped in armour and helmet, the lively motion of the warhorse below his butt and the knight order which encloses his vicinity. All of those are stronger and sturdier than one man. *Contrary to my own weak, sweaty body and the inside of my mind, he thinks. I'm really helpless. If I simply act as usual, I won't fit in, no matter how I try.* Lukas is aware of this aspect of himself.

That's why, let's fight bravely. Let's carry out this obligation proudly. Lukas adjusted his internal pressure by breathing hard and energetically through his nose. *It won't do to get corrected by the Knight Leader many times over like this. The rising pressure can be reduced with words.* Lukas opens his mouth to realize that.

"Say, sensei, do you like war?" (Lukas)

"I don't believe that it's something you call liking, but..." (Daniel)

"Yea. It's the same for me. I don't believe that it's something that should be caused deliberately. However, it gives an uplifting feeling." (Lukas)

"It has this kind of nature, too, I guess." (Daniel)

Daniel pointed at the chest-plate of his armour which is covering his body. One can confirm the crest of the Baron household at the place of the fastener. *It's the figure of a beautiful knight although it's slightly fragile,* Lukas judges. *And it's likely for the sake of something in Daniel's heart.*

"I believe the relationship between people and clothes is the reversal of a lord and retainer relationship. Mood will change depending on the outfit... if one wears a war costume, it will become what one has in mind after all." (Daniel)

"Is that how it works...? Yea, I guess that's how it is. I don't think one wants to kill people just by holding a sword, but armour is slightly different. It makes you think that way. It caused me to feel like it quite considerably." (Lukas)

Lukas laughed. *As my own inexperience felt out of place due to the armament, it would be something very pleasant if the surrounding 3000 also held the feeling, even if only faintly, of being out of place in the same way,* he thought.

"We might encounter the enemy beyond this point, right?" (Lukas)

"Well...?"

"Sensei, you really won't answer anything to things you don't know, eh?" (Lukas)

He could have piled up more words, but Lukas decided to remain silent. He was stopped by the Knight Leader. A moment ago the light cavalry unit, which returned from the northern side, reported in quick words. It seems they discovered the

footprints of the moving enemy forces including their cavalry. Moreover, the footprints are fresh. It can be considered that they are at a location not so far away.

Even while getting nervous, Lukas felt a small amount of regret after all. Not about encountering the enemy ahead, but because they apparently missed each other without noticing. *It looks like the real war won't have dramatic developments like the heroic tales.*

"Young master, we will chase after the enemy by changing our course, but is that alright with you?" (Knight Leader)

"Of course. I'd like you to act as you wish, Knight Leader. I will make my best efforts to not become a hindrance as much as possible, too." (Lukas)

"I shall comply. Then..." (Knight Leader)

Bowing lightly, the Knight Leader gave out the order.

"All troops, change course to the north. Once we arrive at the enemy's footprints, we will pursue by proceeding east." (Knight Leader)

The knight order moves. Until now they have moved like one life-form which is upholding its high spirits. *The battle will begin.* Lukas suddenly shuddered. It's not from fear. It's because he experienced the hallucination of challenging the enemy while being part of the large animal called knight order. He remembered the moment he mounted a horse for the first time.

(I see, this, huh...? From here on it will be the true sight of a battle.) (Lukas)

They run. They dash. They pursue the enemy.

It was the beginning of Lukas Yurihalshira's first battle.

Chapter 28

Is the Plain of Wandering Calamity today red as well?

“There are 500 archers at the front! 1.000 spearmen in the centre! Each of the wings has 250 light cavalry!”

He listens attentively to the report of the scout. Lukas repeated the addition of numbers in his mind. *There are 2.000 enemies in total. Our side has 3.000. The numerical superiority is obvious and especially the cavalry side is overwhelming. Our side has 600 each of knights and light cavalry. If you add it up, that's 1.200 in total.*

The Knight Leader replies seriously. The surroundings are listening attentively, too. *That's only natural, Lukas thinks. It's the enemy. The enemy is beyond this point. Moreover the aspect of their deployment is important.*

“Have you been noticed?” (Knight Leader)

“No, it didn't seem that way. They are continuing their advance towards the east.”

“How about the surroundings?” (Knight Leader)

“I haven't seen any other units. However, I don't understand the state of the enemy's left at the northern side.”

Lukas swallowed his saliva consciously. *It will be a surprise attack. This is a good opportunity for a surprise attack. Won't we probably be able to hope for large military gains if we attacked them straight away from the enemy's rear?* His body trembled suddenly.

“Alright, reset the formation.” (Knight leader)

Upon the Knight Leader's brisk command, 3.000 people consolidated according to each of their roles. Of the 1.800 foot soldiers in the centre, the spearmen went to the front and the archers lined up in the back. Splitting the light cavalry into 300 each and

distributing them to both flanks, the knights likewise divided into 300 each and took position behind the light cavalry.

“Stay at my side, Young Master and Lord Daniel. Make sure to not get careless.” (Knight Leader)

“Got it.” (Lukas)

It is Lukas who replies laconically. Checking the sword belt of his long sword, he wiped the sweat on his hand holding the rider's lance. From the deployment's point of view, his opponent will be the light cavalry. It will turn into a clash of piercing and striking between lance and lance. It will become an exchange of lives with a lance having a length of around twice his body's height. He looks at the tip of the lance. With its shortness and slenderness it's a blade that has no other means but piercing. It's extremely meagre if compared to the curvature and thickness of lances possessed by mighty warriors. However, this is the limit with his physical strength. Even in terms of his horse-riding proficiency, there will be many occasions where he will swing it with one hand. That's because he isn't able to steer the horse for a long time if he separates both hands from the reins.

“Once you pierce with it, you have to abandon it.” (Daniel)

He was startled. It's Daniel. He himself doesn't seem to hold any interest in his own rider's lance and moreover he tells Lukas to abandon his own lance. It was an unexpected statement.

“Sensei, what do you mean by that?” (Lukas)

“It's so that you don't fall off the horse. You will die if you do.” (Daniel)

“That is... that might be so.” (Lukas)

Lukas found it hard to agree. *The lance is not just a weapon but also my pride. I came to fight. Isn't the matter of discarding it like abandoning my duty...?* Lukas was perplexed because of his own obligation.

“At the critical moment, lower your own body and cling to the saddle's edge. Escape while leaving the galloping to the horse... if you live even a bit longer, you will be able to attract the enemy, even if it ends up in you getting killed, for example. That's a technique I saw the mounted bandits use.” (Daniel)

The quietly whispered details hadn't a shred of anything like honour to them. It's the kind of talk no soldier will speak of in Lukas' surroundings... it's a talk about defeat, death and the end. Such talk should be that of weaklings, but it tingled in Lukas' ears more dreadfully than any other story he had heard.

"It's splendid if you can find your own fate. If you are unable to desire that, you won't put your life to good use. You have to exhaust everything... even if it's throwing away your life or discarding your name... even if you are strangled or in pieces." (Daniel)

It wasn't to frighten him. *I'm unable to sense any sorrowful mood. He is just quietly spinning his words. I can't even feel any fervour from the things Daniel is talking about. There's nothing like the battle intent shown by the knights.* Even so, Daniel portrayed something terrifying to Lukas.

(I see... this is what's hidden in sensei's heart, isn't it!?) (Lukas)

Lukas opened his eyes widely. *The man called Daniel Hakkinen hides something...* He realized that he was now peeking at the source of Daniel's unshakable and unperturbed power in front of his eyes. *I'm now able to catch a glimpse of his unknown true nature, which he always hid throughout the three years we spent together. However, what a strong resolution it is!*

It's no wonder that he differs from other nobles, Lukas grasped. *I heard that his parents and older brother relinquished all of their territories feeling ashamed for being unable to protect the hero. They have even given up their peerage once. Although they were bestowed a new peerage by the king, that's nothing but the treatment of fallen nobility. I also know that they went away from the capital and secluded themselves in a northern region.*

How does that connect to such a resolution...? Lukas was dumbfounded. The newly risen questions are bigger than the previous ones. It had a feeling as if you tried to open the lid of a treasure box just to find the entrance to a labyrinth. Lukas has read such a illustrated story.

(I guess it's different from him throwing away his life. Sensei's speech and conduct aren't going haywire. It's not like he has given up. Even though there are many who have fallen as nobles... what's this about?) (Lukas)

"Humans are books", I wonder who said that. Lukas tried to recall it but resigned from

the struggle with his memories as it looked like a difficult fight. *The source doesn't matter. If it's a sword honed by anyone, it will be able to cut the things which can be cut.* And he thought about Daniel. *I want to know the mysteries of this person,* he felt.

“As expected of Baron Hakkinen. I guess that has to be said, but...” (Knight Leader)

That was the Knight Leader. He has a somewhat uncomfortable expression while propping up the surface of his mantle with a hand.

“We are here for the sake of showing the valour of knights to the young master. I won't say anything if it's only a bit, but your example is just far too extreme.” (Knight Leader)

“Excuse me for this.” (Daniel)

The smiling Daniel shows no inkling of his previous atmosphere anymore. The steel, he bared, is wrapped in a fabric of gentleness. He has merely conveyed a hint of his steadfastness to Lukas.

“Well then, young master.” (Knight Leader)

“Yea.” (Lukas)

“Our chivalric order will from now on attack the imperial army's forces. Don't do anything unreasonable by any means, so as to not get separated.” (Knight Leader)

“Got it. I believe it to be an honour to be able to experience the military prowess of the Four Swords Square banner.” (Lukas)

The Knight Leader's orders were passed on.

The foot soldiers of the Sword Square Chivalric Order continue to advance step by step, with the orderly appearance of spears being thrust towards the sky by the dense rows of soldiers. *The fluttering battle flag with its seal of the Four Swords Square, which is reigning over the four cardinal directions with the sword, is heroic. I'm able to see the battle formation of the infantrymen in their state worthy of an army...* Himself being amongst the 300 knights at the rear of the right wing, Lukas felt the steps of the infantrymen to be reliable.

Both wings of the cavalry are in the process of separating from the rows of infantrymen. That's because space is essential for a battle between cavalries. That's

especially obvious for the battle between light cavalry. For Lukas their mobility is something which felt like a gale. Currently they have the same pace as the knights which form the heavy cavalry, but they will nimbly swoop down on the enemy once the distance is appropriate.

Once they passed over two undulations of the terrain, Lukas' eyes could see the figures of the enemy. *Their flying battle flag has the design of a pterosaur. it's the flag of the imperial armed forces which are the main forces of the Eberia Empire. It's swaying busily even if seen from afar. This encounter with the enemy was faster than they anticipated. Sensing the approaching chivalric order belatedly, they stopped the troops and were rearranging the soldiers' ranks, I guess. However, since that's still in process, this is a good opportunity after all.*

The light cavalry of the chivalric order made the first move.

They galloped while drawing an arc deciding to leave the knights behind. The enemy's cavalry advances in order to respond to that. Disliking to circle around the outside, both parties expand their tracks into the plain. It seemed to Lukas like the enemy's movements was tinged with hesitation in contrast to their side's assertiveness. *Since the number of light cavalry on both side isn't that different, this is because of the pressure of the knights' existence after all, he concludes. I have heard that the charge of a heavy cavalry breaks anything.*

"Alright, we will advance as is is while abstaining from getting in touch with the enemy's infantry and cavalry. Go forward at a trot!" (Knight Leader)

300 riders started to move and Lukas first battle began.

The heavily clothed cluster of cavalry advances while shaving off the ground roughly. Lukas observes the state of the infantrymen, with their spears held at the ready, approaching each other at the left front while the light cavalries are scrambling for positions at the right front. Arrows are flying about between the infantries. The exchange between the bowstrings' ringing and the arrows' cutting the wind felt somewhat lacking to Lukas with their nice sounds and good appearances. *That's called the leeway to take a sidelong glance, huh?* However, confirming the situation of soldiers collapsing and cowering in the distance, he immediately experienced a welling up of his feelings. *My cheeks and ears are hot.*

Finally the line of spears held at the ready clashed.

The chivalric order's subordinate knights... those carrying spears and those holding shields of both armies continue to raise war cries. Neither side stops firing arrows even though they are very close to each other. They shoot the arrows aiming at the rear by drawing parabolas in the arrows' trajectories. The soil is crammed with countless footsteps and the sky was filled with angry roars. The enemy's ranks and files are really weak. Little wonder that Lukas' knight unit has decided to approach in the style of a flank assault. The enemy's infantry unit was partially encircled.

"All of you! Display your honour as knights! Attack!" (Knight Leader)

The roaring battle cries repainted everything. *A mounted charge by the knights!*

"Oooh!!" (Lukas)

Lukas bellowed too. He surrendered himself to the flow resembling a tempest of gruelling lances. Mysteriously it's difficult for him to hear the sounds outside. His ears are filled with just the sounds released from within himself. He is in a place close to the centre of the 300 riders, thus his vicinity is only covered with friendly forces without him being able to see an enemy he should thrust his lance at. However, the enemy group is definitely outside of that. They will be destroyed and devoured while squeaking and spouting blood.

"Ah!?" (Lukas)

Because the horse broke its posture slightly, Lukas tasted the scary sensation of floating. He handles the reins in panic. That might be possible if it's during a march, but he will end up isolated in the midst of the enemy if he stops the horse in the middle of this charge. Keeping composure in mind, he matched with the waves of his surroundings. That's why he noticed it for the first time. The state of the ground he is traversing on.

It was the remains of what once was a human body.

The plain, which is usually covered in nothing but weeds, was now a field of flesh which had been levelled and trampled into little pieces in this situation. It's a carpet of blood and oil such that one wouldn't be even able to imagine that those were once the figures of people. *Advancing while changing that which is beneath your feet into the military gains of the attack...* That was a mounted charge.

As something struck his ears, he realized that it was a scream. It was a sound full of

despair with a tone of voice unrelated to something like the bravery of someone fighting. When Lukas lifted his face, he didn't see any infantry spears in his vicinity anymore. They came out. Breaking through the spear-wielding infantrymen's ranks, they are progressing onwards. *In that case the voice just now was probably from the people who were shooting arrows*, he judges. Doing such analysis, Lukas treated it as somebody else's problem.

The screaming doesn't stop with one. As they advance, the number of screams rises in proportion.

Lukas continued to listen. Clearly listening to all of those now, he at last picked up even an interesting word with meaning. It was the name of someone. He was convinced of that. That's because it was the name of a woman. He knew and comprehended it. In the empire women can become soldiers and knights. It's not only the corpses of men he had been treading on. Why did the face of the person he didn't want to remember right now the most, surfaced in Lukas' mind? It was a smile filled with sadness.

Breaking through all of it at last, the landscape of the plain returned into his field of vision. He could see several backs. The imperial soldiers have scattered and are escaping. Taking their distance in account, he discovered that there are few of those who started running after their breakthrough. *Many probably ran away at the moment when the mounted charge crashed into the infantry unit*. Lukas checked their backs one-by-one without this action having any particular meaning. His look rested long on a person with long hair.

"Join up!" (Knight Leader)

He heard the command of the Knight Leader. Merging even while the knights, who charged in from the opposite site, were a bit late, the losses were quickly reported. The 600 mounted knights affiliated to the Sword Square Chivalric Order were all together without a single one missing. Although they linked up in formation, Lukas didn't believe that there will be another mounted charge. The enemy's foot soldiers caved in.

The chivalric order's foot soldiers have linked up again too. However, even without receiving the report, it was obvious that their numbers had decreased. Lukas understands that. *No matter how orderly and in what line of battle they gather and approach, the ranks of the other side had linked up with another platoon and were transporting injured comrades*, he was able to grasp. *Moreover, several familiar army*

mantles have collapsed on the other side and aren't moving anymore.

How did the battle between the light cavalries turn out...? Turning his look here and there, Lukas opened his eyes widely. After looking out towards the west, the northern side is to his right. He was able to see the Heaven's Boundary Mountain Range in the far distance.

The battle flag of the imperial army was fluttering.

At a terrain, which rose in elevation a bit, it's a light cavalry deploying widely to the sides. One of the scouts said 「They are more than 1.000」. Lukas heard that while experiencing a terrible chill. 'The fresh supply of troops, which exceeds a thousand, stares our way with an imposing air. The backs, which had dispersed all over, now, as if being attracted, were heading over there. They are running in hope for safety under the flag of their allies.

That is, in other words, the subordinate knights who galloped that way... it means that the 300 light cavalry of the left wing have been rendered powerless. None of those who separated while confronting the enemy's 250 riders has returned here. I wonder whether that enemy cavalry is still alive on the other side. Or, are they not alive anymore either? The 300 riders of the right wing haven't returned yet either. The lance is heavy, Lukas felt. No my whole body feels heavy. My throat is dry and the interior of my nose has an irritating cramp.

The infantrymen of the imperial army underneath the pterosaur flag and the injured soldiers of the chivalric order underneath the Four Swords Square flag; they are absorbed by their respective sides. Even when that is finished, both sides don't move any further. It became a stand-off.

How long will the confrontation of armies continue...? Lukas doesn't know that objective, accurate point. *It seems like it will be very long.* He had that feeling after a little period.

In the end the clash with that enemy never happened.

Nimbly turning the necks of their horses, the imperial army's light cavalry, which surpasses a thousand, left towards the northwest. Right after that the right wing light cavalry, which headed to the south, returned from the southeast. They apparently drifted off to an unexpected distance while fighting the enemy's light cavalry. Although

it seems like the damage they incurred was shallow, they still reduced them by 20 riders. Not one horseman of the left wing returned.

Finishing it by quickly dealing with various issues, the chivalric order changed its direction. The army's destination lies in the east. They will return to the front-line fortress. They don't shirk on their vigilance towards their surroundings even a bit. The scouts were coming and going at a nervous rate.

Trying to calculate the military gains and losses along the journey, Lukas isn't able to calculate the numbers readily. He abandoned that struggle in the middle. He devoted himself to simply clasping the reins with both hands amongst the knights. He gave the lance to Daniel. And it was only after returning that Lukas realized that his own assistants were safe.

The patrol of the 3.000 Sword Square Chivalric Order and 2 people concluded in a large military achievement and a loss of close to 20% of the total numbers.

In this manner... the first battle of Lukas Yurihalshira ended.

Chapter 29

Heading to a plain where a snake is lurking

“The enemy had more than 3000 troops?” (Klaus)

Finishing scanning through the scroll, Klaus Yurihalshira exhaled long and deeply. The chair’s back creaks. Letting his look wander over the desk and even the bookshelf, he stopped himself reaching for the sake bottle on top of a shelf’s corner. Halting for a short while, he calmly separates from it. Once again Klaus leaked a small sigh. He gazes at the man humbling himself in front of him.

“Yes. I believed the number of cavalry being possibly too scarce for the objective, but that was my thoughtlessness.” (Knight Leader)

The one who replied is an imposing knight at the prime of his life. It’s the Knight Leader of the highly honourable Sword Square Chivalric Order. Possessing a deep loyalty towards the Marquis Yurihalshira household, he is a man who dashed across the battlefield with his horse’s bit lining up next to Klaus’s in the previous war.

That man appeared in the capital’s estate of the Marquis and made his report to Klaus, the family’s head. It’s the details regarding the earlier battle of the Sword Square Chivalric Order in the Plain of Wandering Calamity. He has a bearing as if he is waiting for something, while answering the questions and stopping even after submitting his personally written scroll of that account. Klaus doesn’t lift the wrinkle of his eyebrows.

“Those are magnificent military gains. The number of defeated imperial soldiers exceeds 1000. From the confiscated equipment we were able to confirm that the opponent was the 57th regiment of the imperial army. Since we could partially destroy them in one strike, your prestige as a Chivalric Order has spread far and wide.” (Klaus)

He didn’t answer. His lips are sealed and there’s no smile on them either as he has a calm belief in their bravery. Klaus inhaled deeply, accumulated the air and voiced out his words while exhaling.

“...The losses are large. It’s especially bitter to have lost 320 riders. It wasn’t a damage that should be incurred at this stage of the war where it’s still no more than

skirmishes. This will turn into an issue of accountability.” (Klaus)

“Yes. All of these casualties were brought about by my incompetence. I came here resolved.” (Knight Leader)

Klaus felt a bitter taste within his mouth due to the appearance of the Knight Leader declaring this flatly. *This man is questioning his own course of action.* The Sword Square Chivalric Order is a chivalric order formed by the Marquis Yurihalshira household in order to achieve its goals. Being the family head, Klaus has the duty to judge all of their activities.

320 lesser knights killed in action. That is a grave affair.

In the Asuria Kingdom the status of a knight is proportionate to that of a noble. They are a privileged class which is allowed to hold a family name. Unlike nobles, this is something limited to one generation, but many knights try to not let their name vanish by raising their own children into knights. The investiture of a knight is a special right held by the Four Marquis’ and Six Earls, but on that occasion the fresh knights are allowed to succeed the name of their parent. It’s actually a family name succession.

For a single human, what will work well if he wants to become a knight? There are special case investitures of people who obtained remarkable achievements, but basically the method is to become an apprentice of an active knight. There are various things they must study like military arts, horse-riding, manners and weapon knowledge. Such a person under training is a lesser knight. They are beings who are on the way to become knights one day.

Therefore lesser knights are mainly the children of knights. Although there are some to whom that doesn’t apply, it’s only a minority. Also, in order to avoid weakening because of partiality towards one’s family, lesser knights are unable to have a relative as master. Traditionally they are trying to grow into powerful knights by avoiding the chivalric orders their relatives belong to and become apprentices in a different chivalric order.

On the other hand, a lesser knight has status, too. Even if they are studying under the same master, those who follow as foot soldiers to the battlefield have a lower rank. The higher rank will fight together with their master while being mounted. As they aren’t allowed to possess heavy armour, they gallop nimbly across the battlefield. That is the role of light cavalry.

In other words, the death of 320 mounted lesser knights also means that they let 320 capable men, who were in a position to soon be investiture'd as knights, die. Moreover, most of them were the sons of knights which belong to other chivalric orders. Their parent's expectations were likely great once they were given a horse in the Sword Square Chivalric Order, which ended up resulting in tragedy.

It's inexcusable for Klaus to not punish the Knight Leader in some way. It's not only because of the laws and his position, but there was also an issue with the way the Knight Leader let them die. *The 320 riders, who galloped towards the left wing, ended up becoming a "decoy." If you look at it only from the outcome, then that's how it will be seen. If you add up the 1000 riders who were in a different place, it will result in the enemy light cavalry, which was over there, having 1250 riders. The fact that he dispatched 320 riders to deal with them... he won't be able to escape from having being pointed out that he attempted to use suicidal tactics.*

"...Let's hear the reason why you attacked while limiting your speed to that of foot soldiers after taking the enemy's back." (Klaus)

"Yes. I did so while taking into consideration the stamina of the men and horses due to the already long period of marching. Also, I judged it as highly dangerous to have the foot soldiers stand out by leaving them, as consequence of there being little difference in the numbers between the light cavalries of both sides." (Knight Leader)

In this fight the chivalric order discovered the enemy without the enemy realizing that. Moreover, it was a good opportunity to attack them from behind. Klaus imagined the situation and shook his head slightly. *That's not a situation where you draw attention to the front with foot soldiers as far as I know. At least that's not the way the Sword Square Chivalric Order fights.*

"Why did you split up the cavalry and had them act separately? Let's hear your reasons." (Klaus)

"Yes. It was for the sake of crushing the enemy's morale. We were able to catch sight of discord in the coordination between the enemy's light cavalry and infantry. That was presumed from their usage of scouts and their deployment." (Knight Leader)

"That's why you tried to promote that, you say?" (Klaus)

"Yes. It's just as you've said." (Knight Leader)

Severing the enemy's coordination is efficient and proper as a tactic. In this time's case, the knight unit accomplished that by taking a really effective location. They would be able to inflict a heavy blow no matter how they moved afterwards if they advanced between the enemy's light cavalry and infantry. In reality they partially encircled the infantry by doing that and they tried to make a pincer attack with the light cavalry heading towards opposing sides.

"However", Klaus groaned quietly. Speaking of this time's battle, there was a problem.

The lesser knights exhaustion had been a preamble included in the Knight Leader's orders. Although they excelled at winning, the lesser knights were dispatched into a clash of around 5 minutes be it the infantry or the light cavalry. Causing a gap in the enemy with that is certainly an effective application of a knight unit's mounted charge, but... if one considers another factor, it can be seen in a totally different light. Klaus didn't proceed with the unconfirmed conclusion from his reasoning.

"Sir... you apparently treated my son too carefully." (Klaus)

There was no answer. He won't be forgiven for speaking falsehood to Klaus who is the lord of the chivalric order. It was obvious that this vow is causing his silence.

The tactics used were for the sake of lowering the possibility of danger approaching the knight unit Lukas had joined, as much as possible.

That's the definite truth of this time's battle, Klaus saw through that.

It's impossible for the chivalric order to avoid a battle if they discover the enemy while having the numerical superiority. Though it's not impossible, it has to be quite the reason. And it's very unlikely for something like a reason to avoid it existing if it happens during their patrolling duty where they have been granted permission for battle. They will fight. While protecting Lukas Yurihalshira in his first battle.

Keeping away the light cavalry from the main battle location, the infantry will be responsible for attacking from the front with spears and arrows and the enemy will be destroyed with one strike by carrying out a mounted charge without getting exposed to the enemy's attacks. They won't be traced by mobile troops even in melee. The battle time won't be dragged out either. In order to obtain one swift victory by winning safely as far as Lukas is concerned... only for that reason he made free use of such tactics.

If... , Klaus imagined. If Lukas wasn't there, how would the Sword Square Chivalric Order

have fought?

They probably would have made a decisive action with a mounted charge from the beginning. Klaus is almost convinced of that. They would likely have rushed recklessly at the enemy before the enemy could reshuffle their battle formation while the light cavalry would dash to cover the flanks. Routing the archers and next tearing the spear-wielders to pieces, they would break through the centre of the enemy line. It would be dangerous, but I have no doubt that it would be a much more efficient strike.

And the enemy would get pincer attacked once the foot soldiers caught up. They would have likely earned military gains while crushing them to death. They would have been fully in time even after that to support the battle between the light cavalries. It's also possible that it would have become a pursuit battle just like that once they annihilated the enemy's foot soldiers. Around here my predictions will become vague, but even so it would have likely turned into a greater victory. Probably it would have also ended with less deaths.

All of it is nothing more than an if-story. Klaus didn't commit the folly to voice it out. However, he doesn't blame the Knight Leader either. It was unthinkable for him being able to do so. All of it is Klaus' own responsibility. It's because he appointed the chivalric order so that Lukas could have his first battle.

That's why Klaus spoke those words.

"The light cavalry battalion affiliated to the 57th regiment of the Eberia Empire's army... can they be defeated?" (Klaus)

The tone of his voice has naturally become low and serious. He was aware that he was forcing himself to a new resolution.

"We obtained information regarding them from the captured soldiers. The battalion's commander is Lieutenant Colonel Terenzio Balzero (*T/N: Terenshio Barusero*) of the Imperial Army. I have heard that name on the battlefield. Back then he was a colonel though." (Klaus)

He understood from the Knight Leader's widely opened eyes. Picking up the rising fighting spirit alongside his surprise, Klaus' mouth twisted into a smile.

"Yes, you know that man as well, Sir. It's Balzero the "Blacksnake." I thought that he was a man indifferent to promotions, but on top of a man of such calibre being

demoted, for him to receive an official appointment as battalion commander..." (Klaus)

Balzero the "Blacksnake." It's one of the renowned names of the previous war.

He is a man who passed his time by laying waste to battlefields while leading the strongest mounted unit. Known for his thorough control of his soldiers, the troops led by him moved swiftly and sharply without even the slightest disorder. As a result of them wearing a military cloak for night attacks even during the day, it seemed as if a black snake was attacking the royal army if seen from afar. That's the origin of his nickname.

Klaus only knows of his menace from reports. As he was always at the side of the king, the battles he participated in were naturally only important ones. *And the blacksnake didn't appear on such battlefields often. Being hated by the army's top brass... it was rumoured that the ominousness of his nickname seemed to be true.*

That's why the blacksnake wasn't on the battlefield where the hero died. At that time he was attacking the supply line of the royal army in a totally unrelated location. His troops were known for attacking transport units at various locations.

"He was alive, eh...?" (Knight Leader)

"I have also heard the rumours about the blacksnake's subjugation. And as usual he seems to be a terrifying man." (Klaus)

"Yes. The pressure I felt at the time when I confronted him was something terrible. I wasn't able to move even though we had twice the military forces... for some reason I felt danger from all directions while directly looking at the enemy." (Knight Leader)

"I see. It might have not been necessarily a mistake? The 250 light cavalry the right wing let escape... they were able to reduce them decently, but... it's also possible that they laid in ambush somewhere." (Klaus)

"I see... he is a truly fearsome man." (Knight Leader)

Yes, it's a deplorable type of tactic. Once he put together the reports from the other units, Klaus is able to see the outline of the situation. It seems that "Blacksnake"'s 1000 riders were dispatched as reinforcement in the north after receiving an order from the regiment commander. That was before the Sword Square Chivalric Order and the Imperial Army's 57th regiment clashed. That was because a similar battle occurred then. The confrontation between two battalions of the royal army with 2.000 in total and one

reinforced battalion of the imperial army with 1.500 in total proceeded into a battle with an advantage for the royal army at the beginning, but they were utterly destroyed by the 1.000 riders who assisted as if they were a gale. Both of the royal army's battalions were annihilated and the commanders of each were killed as well.

After they carried out such a battle, they probably participated in the battle between the light cavalries when they were about to return to their own regiment. No, or possibly... Klaus changed his mind. Weren't they lured in with the enemy foreseeing that from the start?

"Let me ask once again. Can my chivalric order defeat them?" (Klaus)

The answer towards that question was given by the Knight Leader's eyes before his mouth did.

"Yes. I shall stake the flag of the Four Sword Square on it." (Knight Leader)

He was lifted into high spirits. It's a declaration waging his pride and honour as knight to subjugate the military commander, who was said to be famous, and the adversary, who defeated his companions of the chivalric order. It's no longer a story of advancing and retreating anymore. The Sword Square Chivalric Order has recognized "Blacksnake" as the arch-enemy in this place. From now on they will pursue him on the battlefield with all their power.

Klaus is able to listen to the fading sound of the Knight Leader, who left the room with loud footsteps. *That was a dearly missed sound. It's the sound of a knight heading to the battlefield while encouraging himself. It's a sound reverberating as nothing but the determination of a person who departs to a world of conflict, where honour and disgrace intersect with each other in an instant.*

Did I sound like that before, too? Or, did I only listen to it in the past as well?

Klaus remembered the old days. He thought about the him at the time when he was in high spirits on the battlefield. *My body was filled with power. Right, now I'm here after fighting to the bitter end while exposing this life to death. I surpassed every kind of trial. My life walked hand-in-hand with the glory of battle. I loyally served the king spending everything I had.*

However, a single flame flickered within his mind making Klaus gasp.

A *gii* resounded from the chair's back. He let go of the fighting spirit, which had swelled up within his body, through a long sigh. The zeal, he felt, cooled down as well. *My body is very heavy. As if becoming decrepit and ugly with age just when I was about to feel young again,* such was the sudden change he tasted.

All of it was a matter of the past.

He had given up the rank of Marshal of the National Armed Forces. Managing the chivalric order and his feudal army, there won't be any chance for him to personally grasp a sword anymore. He has already lost the pride of conflict. Since Klaus is aware of that himself, he scornfully laughs at his previous excitement.

"I had you die and ended up continuing for the sake of death." (Klaus)

Klaus Yurihalshira spun his words in his study where there's no one besides him.

"Inescapable situations and such are ridiculous. You ruled over them. Hardships and such are laughable. You passed away silently. The glory of battle and such is quite absurd. Even now you are putting that name to shame." (Klaus)

It was a tribute. It was a confession. However, there was no regret.

Tears, which don't result in drops of water, seemed to flow down on his dry cheeks.

"The peace you gave us ended up torn apart already... Salomon." (Klaus)

The footsteps, he heard in the past, resounded at a distant place in the ears of Klaus. *The sound greatly perturbing one's mind of the man who resolutely left walking towards death...* the sound which is similar to a nail being struck into an ice field reverberated monotonously and incessantly.

Chapter 30

At times it's rather words than swords

“Well then, do as you wish.”

With this truly blunt and brief comment, Klaus was permitted to station the Sword Square Knight Order at the front line. The aroma of tea is wafting in the summer gazebo. Having it blended by the fragrance of flowers, his nose is itchy. Having the listless timbre of the melodies of wind and string instruments being shoved into his ears, it caused thoughts of mornings in a severe winter for Klaus. The atmosphere, where one loathes the morning while within one's bedding, is close to the one here.

“You wanted to talk only about that?” (Eleonora)

The voice, which should be close-by, is distant. That woman faces in another direction and doesn't cast a single glance at Klaus. Dozing off within the fragrant aroma, her beautiful profile is gazing at the brilliance of the garden's autumn.

Eleonora.

She is a woman holding the first place for the crown's succession rights as a child of Asuria Kingdom's king. She is the person that stands at the summit of the royal family with the king being bedridden. Being the king's proxy in the current situation, it was recognised by everyone that this would change into her being called queen in the near and definite future.

“No... though I know that the progress of the war is being reported by the military authorities, do you have anything you'd like to know? Also, if you have any orders, I will gladly pass them along.” (Klaus)

“Did we win?” (Eleonora)

“Because of the esteemed authority of His Majesty the King as well as Your Highness, Princess Eleonora, we have more wins than losses in the small skirmishes in the Plain of Wandering Calamity.” (Klaus)

“I see. That’s great.” (Eleonora)

No intonation whatsoever could be felt from her voice. As usual that voice is flung towards the garden. Klaus could do nothing but repeat his words many times over.

“...A cause for concern is the delays in the transportation of goods to the front. Putting aside the overland route, the water route is of no use. The safety on water is unsatisfactory.” (Klaus)

There was no reply. However, it will be wrong if Klaus doesn’t tell her. She is listening with the long scroll of the report having been tossed away without its seal being broken. The characters and numbers revealed in the report are a record of the many risking their lives and their numerous desperations. There’s no way one can bury that in tales and scriptures which play lightly with words.

“I’ve been told that we can reduce the losses by shifting most of the traffic towards the land route together with an increase in the number of guards. Can I get your approval for that?” (Klaus)

“That’s no good. A war is controlled by the performance on water... add more ships. I like ships more than horses and cattle.” (Eleonora)

“...Ha. I shall comply.” (Klaus)

It’s this. Eleonora has this... Klaus stifled the anger in his belly. Even though she has entrusted most of the governmental affairs to Klaus’ Four Marquis’ and Six Earls, she sometimes persists on policies that don’t match reason by wielding the power of the state in strange ways. At the times when she does that, she’s always full of confidence. Even now she is smiling while gazing at Klaus.

“Then, although the phase has fallen behind schedule a bit, we will hurry with our preparations somehow. Taking into account the changes in the state of affairs, I wonder whether the season of spring will be early as well so that the chance for battle in the Plain of Wandering Calamity will arrive.” (Klaus)

“I see.” (Eleonora)

She isn’t interested, huh? Klaus once again swallows down the feelings of this being a fruitless effort. The trends of Eleonora’s curiosity and interest are completely incomprehensible for Klaus. It changes several times a day on top of being irregular.

Even if she were to suddenly voice out a desire for battle and her hate for ships this evening, it wouldn't surprise Klaus.

She is fickle.

That's Klaus' assessment about Eleonora. *Now I have to lessen the range of her illogical whims so that they won't influence the general situation. However, that's only after having appeased her,* Klaus judges. *At any rate, at the time when she gets confronted with difficulty, that unsteadiness will likely take on a clear shape...* That was his dark prediction. *The kingdom might once again have to face a crisis.* There was no way for Klaus to permit that.

"Ah, that's right." (Eleonora)

Suddenly raising her voice, Klaus returned his consciousness and sight towards Eleonora. And what he saw there were lively emotions. The atmosphere of her being somewhat half asleep and half awake until now vanished. Her crimson lips have taken the shape of a distinct smile.

"Send Paulina to the front lines." (Eleonora)

"...Ha? Her Majesty Princess Paulina... you say?" (Klaus)

Due to it being far too erratic, Klaus wasn't able to do anything but to merely ask back without consenting or refusing. The edges of Eleonora's lips were raising increasingly and her teeth peeked out. Her cruel innocence emerged in the shades of the summer gazebo.

"Margareta and I went to the front lines. In that case it's unfair, right?" (Eleonora)

A giggling laughter followed about. Klaus forgot his words. He simply listens.

"Have her console the officers and soldiers at the front. That's the duty of royalty. Have her go right away as well." (Eleonora)

Klaus felt uneasy with the other side being devoid of reason. *The tour of visitation in the kingdom's northern territories by the princesses was suggested in this style as well. No, no matter what kind of idea it is, if it's said by Eleonora, it will turn into a decree originating from royalty. As long as it isn't too far removed from reason, the intentions of those, who are rulers, will move the country. Even if it's a proxy.*

The Third Princess Attempted Assassination Case... although the perpetrator was executed, Klaus was afraid that this was something done in order so that others won't arrive at the truth of the incident. *Possibly she will be targeted this time as well? It would be better if the person aiming for her was someone from the empire. It will be a crisis if disturbing elements have slipped into the kingdom's ranks.* Klaus was concerned about commotions in the army.

"...Let's have her Royal Guard Unit accompany her as an escort." (Klaus)

"Ah, there was that thing, too. Make them fight." (Eleonora)

"Wh-, by no means, is your command to dispatch the Royal Guard Unit into the Plain of Wandering Calamity?" (Klaus)

"They are soldiers, right? My soldiers won. I wonder how that girl's soldiers will do...?" (Eleonora)

Klaus had difficulties to understand what she was talking about, but he leaked a small groan after comprehending the meaning of **soldiers** mentioned by Eleonora. It's the Sword Square Knight Order. Eleonora is talking about the Sword Square Knight Order, which was sent to the front by Klaus, as "my soldiers." *It's a knight order of a noble who is part of her own faction. Her reasoning is coherent.*

It was a battle to make Lukas experience his first campaign. The knight order paid dearly for that attempt, but even so they returned victorious. The Knight Leader demonstrated his resolution and Klaus piled up even more resolution on top of that. It resulted in the knight order having an arch-enemy against whom they will gamble their battle flag.

All of that was currently mentioned in a tone as if wondering whether a garden's flower would bloom or not. The next sovereign, Eleonora, talked in such way. That person, where it's doubtful whether she knows about the repeated sortie of the knight order, has decided to send 1500 soldiers, who were locked away in the hinterland, towards the front line with the reason of competing against the Sword Square Knight Order. That group, which was even told to break up at one point in time, in a lighter tone than pruning garden shrubs, as if she just now remembered them.

"For their preparations... let's give them one season. Won't it be necessary to give them additional funds to cover the costs for preparations and arrangements?" (Klaus)

Klaus spit out those words as if squeezing them out. Being sealed off for half a year in a discarded fortress, he didn't believe that the Royal Guard Unit is sustaining its original scale. Although they had half the numbers even at the best of times, they were neglected without providing anything but small funds for operating. Klaus expected that they would remain in name only in the near future. And he believed that it was necessary for it to act out like that, too. *In the current kingdom it's far too dangerous for royalty to possess personal military forces.*

However, soldiers were pitiful. Soldiers are abused by politics, but sending them to their deaths without even decent preparation is too unreasonable. Klaus knows about the reality of the battlefield. *Unable to put armour on their bodies, without swords entrusted to their hips and wandering the front while hungry is equal to an execution. If a soldier is dismissed, that's alright. But, they cannot be left to die miserably while still soldiers.*

It won't do if you don't assemble the soldiers quickly once they are sent to the front line. This is not something that can be handled with a rationale originated from peaceful times. It won't work unless one gathers mercenaries, screens them and carries out military drills with the troops after they agreed to being integrated into the remaining soldiers. Also, one must arrange equipment, provisions and means of travelling and transport. If they are fast, it will take 40 days, and twice that if they are slow, Klaus judged.

However, the reply was concise cruelty.

"Not allowed. It's right away." (Eleonora)

Without time to ask why, red and white danced beneath the joy filling both eyes.



“Make them fight before that girl arrives at the front. They are not allowed to meet. The meeting shall be after the battle. Have that girl hurry with the kid. Since they have no tasks or preparations to do anyway, make them depart by today. And, if they still didn’t fight by the time that girl arrives, charge them with labour as punishment. That will be only natural since they avoided fighting by going against the king’s decree, right? Have them dig up a pond. I will enjoy watching ships floating there.” (Eleonora)

She raised a loud laughter. It contained a sound that made Klaus’ blood run cold. Though he possesses the strength to face adversity, which was tempered on the battlefield, he wasn’t able to bear something like this. *It’s poison. This is some kind of toxicity.* As Klaus was overcome by a daze, the beautiful princess continued to expose words seething with venom.

It seems there was a rumour.

It was at first the scorn at the solitude of the Third Princess who wasn’t able to create something like a royal guard. Ridiculing her non-existing personal virtue, which caused her to be attacked by soldiers, let alone thieves, they sneer at her cowardice to put together an escort in panic. That Royal Guard Unit headed towards an abandoned fortress in the sticks without even being allowed to be stationed in the capital... they sneer at her once again as that’s suitable for a pack of stray dogs.

However, due to a new rumour having appeared, the circumstances apparently became unpleasant for Eleonora.

There’s the name of a single boy at the lowest seat of the Royal Guard Unit. Marko, a village child from a remote region. He has saved the life of the third princess by putting his own life on the line. Even boldly declining being adopted as noble’s child, he has unswerving loyalty to the country. Such boy said the following,

“It’s my greatest gratification being allowed to work for Her Majesty the Princess. This feeling isn’t only mine either, but something naturally harboured by anyone who experienced Her Majesty’s spirit. With Her Majesty being the true manifestation of a heart of respect and affection for the Royal Guard Unit, we want to do only that for the kingdom and there’s no greater honour than that. That which we are is a testimony of the bonds tying a sovereign and his people.” (Marko)

Listening to it after being warped by Eleonora, its contents still contained something touching for Klaus. *A member of royalty receiving sincere and reverential acceptance by*

the people... That was too luscious even if it was a dream. And it harboured a hope which is shameful. Although he stopped their dissolution, it's Klaus who sealed the Royal Guard Unit in the sticks. He anticipated them withering away. What did the boy think seeing the fortress? How is he spending his time and what is he dreaming of?

Even without knowing that, he was able to guess the displeasure of the princess in front of his eyes. *The purity of the boy's speech likely isn't all that amusing for Eleonora. And neither is the Royal Guard Unit, for her, who encountered and came in contact with the population of the northern fiefs. There's probably no necessity for her absence or presence, Klaus guesses. It's jealousy. You might say that she's asking for too much. Is she unable to stomach for the third princess to possess one thing that she doesn't...?* It demanded a great effort for Klaus to subdue his anger.

That's because he understood that she wants to crush them. *Eleonora desires it while harbouring childlike emotions. Declaring the Sword Square Knight Order, to whom she didn't show any interest until now, as her soldiers, she wants to denounce the Royal Guard Unit with their victory. Their defeat is already a decided matter within her mind. She gave various orders for the sake of sneering at the appearance of their defeat. Or she might be already seeing it,* Klaus thinks. He shivered due to her repulsiveness.

The sight of Eleonora being in a trance... is in direct opposition to Paulina and the Royal Guard Unit being reduced due to that cold-bloodedness. She intends to make a ceremony out of it while the officers and men at the front lines are watching. The contrast between the winning knight order and the losing Royal Guard Unit. The contrast between her own soldiers and those of Paulina. The contrast between her brilliance and Paulina's wretchedness.

(Will you let soldiers... a boy with unswerving loyalty die because of such worthless motive?)(Klaus)

It was necessary to stop that. Klaus tried to protest against it in rage, but he was unable to. There was a ruthless gaze piercing him. Sticking out her finger, Eleonora showed her readiness to denunciate Klaus.

"You let Hero-sama die without helping him." (Eleonora)

A sharp remark was stuck towards Klaus' forehead.

"Because you didn't protect father-sama and because you didn't kill that man, Hero-

sama ended up getting killed by imperial soldiers. I begged for his rescue. No one wanted to listen to me. That's why I curse all of you. However, I will forgive you. With that man dying you have granted my wish. Don't forget, Marquis Klaus Yurihalshira. You have to put in great effort for my pardon. Because there's not one moment where I forgot about Hero-sama." (Eleonora)

Is there something like emitting a feeling of freezing from a fingertip? Klaus feels the coldness. The power in his whole body was drained and continued with a feeling of dropping by and by. Inside him a flame of sadness and gloom burns brightly and quietly. His heart has crumbled down and yet he is staring himself at the gaze of a single man... and a voice, that can't be heard, is audible. *If I met this grudge sooner*, he regrets.

Klaus parted with time. Having himself swallowed up by the forces in the past, he became someone who wouldn't look gloomily at the present and future. Klaus raised a roar being sandwiched between cold and heat. But he wasn't able to vocalize it. It was merely painful.

"Step back. It's time for my prayer." (Eleonora)

While trying to get a clear image how he might have answered, Klaus left the royal castle. Even getting on a carriage was troublesome. Even after he arrived at the mansion, he was unable to stand up for a while after the carriage's door was opened. He was sluggish. His body refused going back to the scenery outside the carriage.

Klaus touched the small pouch containing a talisman hanging at his neck. Currently he thought about his deceased former wife. He thought about his sons who fell in the war. His current wife and her offspring didn't cross his mind. His body was too heavy for him to think of them.

He closed his eyes.

Even so, it wasn't allowed for Klaus Yurihalshira to cry.

Chapter 31

If together we live, together we...

That man's enthusiasm and ferociousness were obvious to everyone's eyes.

Although his red mantle had been ruined, the black lining accentuated his bulging muscles and ferocious limbs, giving off the thick air of wanting to seize the lives of his foes. With a decoration of a red string swaying at the pommel of his backward-bent sword, which is affixed to his hips, there are blood-spurts or something similar visible on the sword, resulting in it having a dangerous aura. On top of his neck, which had a golden ring coiling around it, he has a charming, manly face containing wildness within.

That much is fine. Even Oiva will regard him as a reliable ally while thinking 「How dangerous」 if he goes that far. Previously he was hostile, but that changed into him having his skills trusted all the more. The chief of the bandits, Kustaa. *Without a doubt, he is a strong person.*

“...Kustaa, stop it and put my hair up already. How long are you going to use the comb?”
(Marko)

“Just a bit longer. It's just a bit more. You ain't allowed to move. Hehehe.” (Kustaa)



Why is he doing something like hairdressing with a smile plastered on his whole face? Oiva doesn't know the reason, while observing it, either. His ability, which is splendidly put into practice, arranges politely and courteously the black hair while relying on a small knife and skilfully combing with a comb in compact tireless motions. The one who is sitting while that's done to him is Marko. He has an expression of disagreement.

"Kustaa, just now, did you mutter "how about some earrings" or such? I won't do that. I won't wear such things. I don't want a collar either. Why are you just thinking about such pointless things?" (Marko)

"That's a wasteful talk, Marko-sama. It became such precious black hair. Let's adorn it with gold and put on red decorations, let's just do that." (Kustaa)

"You still haven't fixed that annoying habit, Kustaa!?" (Marko)

"As promised, it won't be a copy of mine." (Kustaa)

"All the same, for me to match with you...!" (Marko)

What's with this scene, I wonder? Oiva placed the sword, he was holding, to the side for the time being. More or less he was vigilant. Even while thinking that he must do so in the particular case of Marko, something like getting his windpipe slit due to negligence shouldn't happen in these circumstances. Even if it's the worst case. He didn't expect that he would be seeing such a thing.

He surveyed the surroundings while breathing out. Many people turned their faces away just then. It's the members of the Royal Guard Unit. Oiva nods his head towards them. That's because he can understand their feeling of spectating very well. *Though it might be effective for making Kustaa blend in with the unit...* Realizing that, Oiva nodded and said "I see."

This place is already the front line... it's one among the many fortresses established in the Plain of Wandering Calamity. There's still a bit time until we are scheduled to sortie, but it has been decided that we will start going ahead immediately due to the combination of our circumstances and the kingdom's. Oiva was convinced. *It looks like Marko plans to do everything that can be done.*

The idea of merging Kustaa's 1500 mounted bandits with the Third Princess' Royal Guard Unit is a story from a few days ago. It was something that happened soon after Oiva arrived at the front line fortress. It brought about surprise for the officers and

men at the front due to two facts.

First, it's about them being quite the elite soldiers. All of the 1500 riders had an air of being dignified experts as light cavalry drifting about. The movements of every single horse and man possess sharpness and elegance, moreover, they are led without even the slightest unrest. As they were publicly three units of mercenary corps, many of other units came to inquire about the details of the contract. Every place is wishing for a powerful cavalry.

Second, it's about them arriving from north of the fortress. There are generally three ways to arrive at the front line fortress from the kingdom's territory. The overland route heading North from the capital, passing through Helrevi Earldom and going East through Salmant Earldom. The overland route of crossing the river towards the West from the capital, passing through Marquis Yurihalshira's territory and going South through Peterius Earldom. And the waterway going north on the Eastern Dragon River from the capital and then proceeding westwards on one of its branches. Something like a road coming from the North has been unknown. Kustaa stated 「We crossed through the northern border area」.

Oiva heard the entirety of it from Marko. They arrived by using the “black market salt” route.

How did the mounted bandits move with what objective? If it's according to Marko's concise explanation, it apparently was 「Disturbance of the front line's war potential replenishment」. Intervening with the kingdom's salt's price with black market salt, the income of the national treasure was reduced in order to affect the war expenditures. Meanwhile, the supply line of the Helrevi Earldom was devastated and the flow of military goods was made to stagnate. Didn't they delay the time of the war breaking out for two years as a result of that? Marko recited.

Not just Oiva but everyone, who took the oath, was surprised by this even though they also agreed with it. They are aware that the activity of the mounted bandits in Helrevi Earldom was something that disregarded profit. That's because they aimed at military goods even while braving danger. And, as for what turned the tables on them was for sure the mounted bandit subjugation.

Black market salt and robbery. The goal of those two activities was likely to obtain vast profits as means and not as the property itself. If their goal was to simply obtain riches, it would have sufficed if they had just distributed the black market salt. There wouldn't

be even any necessity to be mounted bandits.

Then, why did they want to delay the time of the war outbreak? Marko hasn't talked about that. Putting thievery aside, the activity of dealing with black market salt might have been rather inconvenient in war times, but... the ability of Oiva's intuition can't grasp the answer to that.

That's because the degree of training of Kustaa's group as cavalry is something inexplicable. Their strength isn't in the area of them having acted violently because they wanted to do so. Originally the cavalry of Salomon's army might have been their parent organization. However, why did they continue to preserve their strength for so long? Oiva daringly predicted the reason for that.

Isn't it Marko?

Didn't they wait for Marko?

It's a story that doesn't make any logical sense, but the mounted bandit's loyalty towards Marko gives Oiva such an impression. The persuasion of Marko's sworn comrades to let him go to the mounted bandits, that bizarre scene, it seems to look like the origin of their loyalty. However, Oiva knows about a previous mystery.

It's Kustaa. At the time when Marko pierced Kustaa's both shoulders... to be precise when he aimed to pierce them, I already saw one strange occurrence. The eyes of Oiva, who was very near, were able to perceive the matter of Kustaa being defenseless as he was obviously temporarily paralyzed. It's his gaze. Marko releases dreadfulness from his blue eyes sometimes... it looks like it isn't something that is effective against everyone, but... it hit Kustaa very hard. Oiva felt that.

It was like that at the time with Bertrand as well. Oiva believes that he saw that strange coercion at that time, too. And it was odd to the degree of a leader of villains wanting to pledge allegiance. It's no exaggeration to call him a fanatic and Oiva can sense the same atmosphere from the mounted bandits such as Kustaa.

In reality, Oiva feels that they also entered the fortress without investigating it properly. *At any rate, they are mounted bandits. It doesn't look like they acted as thieves anywhere else but in the Helrevi territory, but even so, there's something called bodies clad in brutality. It's a military power different from mercenaries, who looked like it was business, or military which was regulated. It's mixed with insanity like being driven*

through ferociousness.

(Especially that lot... well, Kustaa is first on the list though.) (Oiva)

Ahead, where Oiva stared at, there are people who are receiving special treatment amongst the first unit of the mounted bandits. They are marked by a red cloth wrapping around their necks. Each and every one of them makes Oiva, as a soldier, feel that they have a level of capability making him put himself on guard. On top of that, each of them stands still with some sort of martyr-like serenity. *There's 99 of them. 100 if Kustaa is included. They are the former prisoners who headed to their village together with Marko.*

They have passed three years together with Marko and have now once again appeared in front of Oiva's eyes. They are opponents he crossed swords with on one occasion, but Oiva doesn't think that he wants to carry out the same thing with them now. He had a mental state of flatly refusing that.

(They, every last one of them, are "mad dogs." Someone who can wield a blade like that, a blade that has gone mad. Ah, how scary, how scary.) (Oiva)

Making them and the Royal Guard Unit mesh with each other isn't simple. Realistically the troops organization at this point has become something peculiar. The one organizing them is Marko, thus there's isn't a single person who complains.

500 riders, with all of them being formerly feudal army cavalry, are led by Akseli as heavy cavalry. They have been fully equipped with armours, helmets, long-handled spears and rider's bows. They are expected to mainly move in cooperation with the infantry. They are the 500 riders who should become the core of the whole army.

500 low-ranking soldiers, with all of them being formerly foot soldiers of the feudal army, are led by Jarkko as spear infantry. As their style of equipment designates them as heavy infantry, they repeatedly trained forming an iron wall with their pikes and shoulder-high shields. Judging from their appearance, Oiva deems these 500 soldiers to be the most difficult for cavalry to break through.

500 people with a style that can be called "Jack of all trades" or something along those lines completely consisting of the former Hakkinen Guard Corps led by Oiva. Were they called a multi-purpose unit? As a unit their special skill results in digging holes but individually they are a gathering of ruffians who are carrying tools and holding

bows. They have just advanced from being originally mercenaries, therefore there are many among them whose trait is to be strong in individual battles.

And there are the 1500 mounted bandits as light cavalry led by Kustaa. *Marko will be included there. No, him joining them is out of the question, Oiva reconsidered. The overall command lies with Kustaa, but Marko will form a unit of 100 riders directly leading 99 riders from among those. They are the aforementioned 99 red-clothed riders. Their war potential possesses something that makes even him as an ally shudder because of the 100 riders. Remembering the 100 riders on the battlefield, Oiva muttered 「How scary, how scary」 .*

“What are you afraid of, Oiva?” (Akseli)

The one who called out to him in a carefree tone is Akseli. It’s the man who is entitled to work as leader of the Royal Guard Unit.

“Mmh? The red bunch.” (Oiva)

“Ah, that*, huh? That is amazing as well. They are a rather mysterious bunch that has taken the shape of people.” (Akseli) *(T/N: Akseli refers to them as “are (あれ)” which means “that”)*

“That’s a strange way of talking. In that case, what kind of shape do they have below then?” (Oiva)

“They are weapons. They are swords or spears, though one can’t imagine what kind of shape they have... anyway, they are something extremely dangerous. They are soldiers heading towards a future as death soldiers. It’s probably a nightmare to have them as enemies.” (Akseli)

The eyes of Akseli, who evaluates them in such way, don’t have their usual colour of enjoying the world. They are sharp. There’s something making him put up his guard as a person towards those red-clothed people, obviously coercing his tension to what he sees as sharpened blades. The other mounted bandits are better able to fit in with the unit, but that’s probably impossible for those 99, Oiva believes.

“...Having said that, I don’t think that they are a lot that I can lead. There’s no choice but leaving it to Marko.” (Akseli)

“Aye, that’s for sure, no mistake there.” (Oiva)

He began to gaze at Marko in a manner of having a keen interest in throwing in the towel as it looks like Akseli’s judgement is the same as well. At the place of the 13-years-old boy, who gathers the attention of the unit in various meanings, it looks like the arranging of his hair has finally finished. Before the battle, his hair was fastened behind. The fastening string is red golden and Oiva discovers Kustaa’s obstinacy in there being a two-coloured braid.

“What happened? Did you finish the organization of the military supply unit?” (Marko)

Marko came walking while touching his hair. *His lightweight equipment, that still doesn’t include armour and helmet, gently envelops the flesh of the keen and nimble boy. A sharp sword is affixed to his hips... coupled with a sword ornament bestowed by Earl Helrevi, it had an elegance that can’t be described very well.* Oiva’s ears catch voices of admiration leaking in the surroundings.

“Everything was put in order without problems. No, well I just met unexpected difficulties with hiding the surplus in goods and personnel.” (Akseli)

Akseli answers with a broad grin without minding the surroundings. *This man, who boasts of being the first retainer of Marko among Marko’s followers, is careful in his work concerning everything.* By the way, for Oiva Bertrand is considered to be the first one to have taken an oath of lord and retainer with Marko, but the point made by Akseli was his interpretation of not counting believers since they aren’t retainers.

“It’s a favour from Lord Yurihalshira. Did you give priority to that?”

“Of course. It’s restricted to hiding it in one hand. That’s because it feels the best to get a free gift.”

“Well, it’s something unexpectedly scary since it’s for free, but... this time it is probably meant as an apology, too. Accepting it will console him.”

“How about creating flowery prose once again?”

“That’s right, isn’t it? Shall we offer that to him as a replacement for payment despite it being meagre?”

Oiva looked at the two, who giggle together, with a slightly astonished feeling. It’s not

about the previous words of Akseli, but he thinks that he doesn't want to turn such a human into an enemy. He sighs greatly.

A large quantity of military goods for the Royal Guard Unit arrived from the Marquis Yurihalshira household. It amounts to quite a lot money if the workers, horses and cattle to carry those are included. Moreover, it's a lavish hospitality since war funds have been provided in addition to that as well. For the Royal Guard Unit, which was able to sufficiently put in order the preparations for the battle even without that, it was just a shriek of delight.

Yes, the Royal Guard Unit has prepared everything for this day, this time. It was a schedule that isn't objectionable even though it's an unreasonable, sudden demand, but it was within the range of their forecasts if it's Oiva's group.

This time's dispatch of the Royal Guard Unit to the front line is according to the king's decree. Basically, the Royal Guard Unit is groundlessly listening to the order of someone other than the Third Princess, but they are obliged to accept the current matter because it's a decree connected to the bestowal of a fortress. The condition will end up becoming inadequate if they don't put the saying 「Make use of your bravery」 into practice.

However, Marko implemented a plan enabling them to carry out that decree. Its details have suffered many minute divergences, but the basic route is an act of provocation towards the First Princess. The Royal Guard Unit is an eyesore to begin with. It seems to be so because they are the guards of one princess right after their establishment. Just after that, they ran around provocatively.

Even after being stationed at a fortress near inland waters, Marko advertised liveliness and eagerness pointing at something. While using the fame, he beautifully obtained himself, he created rumours and mingled those into Chitoga City. The Royal Guard Unit offers its adoration to Princess Paulina as the one and only true royalty and longs for the opportunity of service and devotion to sacrifice their own bodies... Oiva can't do anything but laugh after it has become like this. If pushed to say, it's because I've heard that the princess is a noodle artisan.

This times matter doesn't concern Daniel in the capital overly much. He has experienced a battle at the front as the performer of yet another plan. There have been several objectives for making him depart for the front with the knight order belonging to the Marquis Yurihalshira household. Among those, the biggest aim is the

strengthening of the supply line from the South. Stimulating the distribution of goods by moving a knight order rather than the royal army, their vigilance will become strict as well. After all is said and done, it's an army which is influencing the honour of a Marquis household. The knights are proud, too. If this also becomes the first campaign of the Marquis household's legitimate child, it could be expected for them to be prepared to the degree of scattering flowers by hitting water on the main road*. Moreover, it's within a short time. (T/N: "Setting the stage for a grand success" is a possible interpretation as the first part relates to an opening in Kabuki while the second part is something related to weddings where the scattering of flowers is done in hope for prosperity of the couple.)

The supply line from the East by going through the Helrevi territory is close to perfect. Was this something foreseen with the activity as Hakkinen Guard Corps? Oiva was appalled. The distribution and management of goods by Lauri is thorough. A thank-you-letter was passed on from Earl Helrevi because he achieved everything in accordance to the excessive account books. Since it's been rumoured that it has lately become a shop that deeply impressed the Earl, Marko's remark 「Please don't head-hunt him as a government official of the territorial administration」 isn't exaggerated, Oiva believes.

In regards to the waterways, originally it has been expected for them to cause big problems. That's because it reached the point of strict inspections being carried out even if it's cruising formalities, making the management of ships all of a sudden troublesome. Because those are carried out by civil officials of the central government dispatched from the capital and not by civil officials of the Marjanta territory, who had been won over, we should be pressed into a painful choice with something as Royal Guard Unit. Moreover, there's the cleaning up of the frequently appearing brutal river pirates.

However, once the boss of the river pirates became a follower, it became easy instead.

The river pirates, led by Bertrand, rampaged greatly and smuggled most of the stolen goods to the Helrevi territory. Even if the route was different, the goods were delivered and just its prices were left in Bertrand's hand. Once it became like this, the rest was easy. The share of the Royal Guard Unit is borrowed from among the stolen goods and the profits of the smuggling are allotted to the war funds. Without using the fortune concealed in Lauri's management, the Royal Guard Unit steadily advanced its preparations. Something like the transport of 1500 people was carried out with a carefreeness of mixed humming. Who will travel by smuggling and who will travel by a regular ship, once it was decided by lottery, it was finished.

“As a matter of fact, even this sake has been mixed into the things addressed to me.”

“It’s a high-class item. That’s probably the point of visiting soldiers at the front to provide comfort.”

“There’s something like this, too. It’s a military mantle of high quality, but it’s addressed to Marko.”

“...Just a minute, that old man’s health has become worrisome.”

Looking at the two where one can’t see whether they are trying to play around, Oiva sighs once again. He is troubled by the difficult circumstances, but it’s unacceptable for him to slacken his feelings of tension because they have such composure.

“What’s the matter with you since some time ago, Oiva? You look worn-out.”

“Hmm... unfortunately there’s nothing addressed to Oiva.”

After saying such things, Oiva couldn’t help but breath out a grand, third sigh. *It’s probably extremely terrifying to have him as an enemy, but it seems that he’s quite the problem even as an ally.* He returned honest words,

“Good grief, even if you can say that there’s too much reliability, it’s just causing sighing.” (Oiva)

The blue-eyed young warrior, whose black hair was fastened, replies,

“In that case let me sigh as well. I will be counting on you, you two.” (Marko)

Those words, alongside a smile, spread within the autumn breeze after tickling his ears.

Chapter 32

Resembling a blow that isn't too much nor too little

The wind is ringing and the earth is grumbling. The sky is serene and high. The ground stirs as it's kicked and stepped on.

While Kustaa changed the grip of his spear to two-handed, he stood up in the stirrup against better judgement. It's a sort of dangerous riding trick, and yet it's impossible to make the horse decelerate. In front of his eyes spreads an area with gentle hills within the Plain of Wandering Calamity. He is instinctively able to interpret all of the ups and downs as merit for tactics. After stretching his neck, he looked at the rear suddenly.

While making the White Dragon Flag flutter across its entire length, 500 riders gallop. He recognises the faces of all of them, they are his colleagues with whom he went through both joys and sorrows for this time, for this day. Kustaa smiles within the wind pressure. Responding smiles appeared everywhere. It stands to reason. They are currently allowed to dash forward as military men underneath their true lord. Even the enemy they are supposed to defeat... there!

On the opposite site of the 500 smiles a pterosaur is flapping in the wind. A light cavalry battalion of the Imperial army, 1000 riders. *The state of them rushing ahead of us makes it easy to understand that they are good riders by the manner in which they seem to pitch forwards as if falling.* Those wielding spears are still obvious, but Kustaa holds doubts what the people, who have drawn their swords with their associates in the meantime, are planning to cut. It's completely a race with the ranks being disordered.

(Well, in regards to the ranks, our side looks bad, but... hmm) (Kustaa)

Kustaa's 500 riders are galloping in groups of several riders each. *With them intermingling in a meandering way with each other, overall it certainly looks unsightly, I suppose... I made them advance so that it would seem like that.*

(The distance is around this much, I suppose. Their way of being disordered is so-so, too. However, are their horses just a tiny bit inferior? It will be troublesome if I can't get them

to run a bit longer.) (Kustaa)

The reason for Kustaa deliberately standing up was that it would be difficult to adjust the speed if he can't check with his eyes. It's quite complicated to keep a distance where they aren't overtaken while appearing to be so. For Kustaa there are many worrying scenes where the opponent is an enemy who has insufficient military technique. It's also necessary for them to appear appetising as a carrot before one's eyes.

However, the compensation of all that work approached in a distinct shape.

A hill like a huge wall can be seen in front of the route. It's long and tall. Since there are small undulations on both sides once you arrive there, it might appear as if Kustaa's group is leaping into a dead end of the plains once one looked down from the heavens. He went ahead while examining the spacious terrain, but it's a location that was recognised as perfect ground for a cavalry vs. cavalry battle.

"...Alright, go, go." (Kustaa)

Right after announcing that, Kustaa sat down and spurred on his horse. The wind pressure immediately gains in strength. It's a horse with the distinction of being chosen from among good horses, which were singled out before having been trained. If he felt like it now, it would be fast. He approved of it with a passing mark, it's different from a horse of the same kind. Kustaa believes in that proudly. *We now move gladly as the elite war potential of our lord!*

Without changing their speed on the open field, the 500 riders ran up a slope. Turning towards the right as they ascend, they are drawing a parabola with the horse-riding cluster on the hill. As if something that was thrown into the sky and is now falling down in return... the 500 riders were now running down with a sharpness in their ranks similar to a spearhead. At the head is Kustaa. He plunges in headfirst.

"Get ready!" (Kustaa)

In front of Kustaa's eyes was reflected the situation of his allies crushing into the enemy. What hit the enemy at the flanks, appearing from the undulations at both sides, are 500 elite light cavalry riders on each side. Penetrating into the 1000 enemy riders even while flying the White Dragon Flag in the wind in a strange state, they run up the undulations while inverting each others sides. The ones left behind are only the

disordered enemies.

Towards a place that turned into a chaotic crucible where men and horses aren't maintaining front and rear anymore. Into a forest of flesh and iron with the name called horse-riding.

"Go!" (Kustaa)

They pierced through.

The enemy, although being divided into three big parts due to the penetration from left and right, was cut up in a straight line. That breakthrough force, which had its might enhanced by speed, rivals the charge of heavy cavalry. Penetrating the vague interior of the cluster as something sharp, tough and swift, they spread out and scattered the enemies. In front of the spearhead with the name Kustaa the masses are also divided. The rider's lance with its scarlet decoration, which is brandished in both his hands, is repeatedly painted in red, without the time to dry, as it emits steam.

"Capture the horses! Kill the men!" (Kustaa)

Now taking up position at the exit and entrance which became a dead end for the Imperial army, Kustaa wields his lance more and more. There is no intention to let either horses or men get away from the encirclement with Kustaa's 500 riders in the west, a hill in the east and 500 riders each in the north and south. Although a small quantity of horses disappeared towards the east, he offered them surrender without waiting for the imperial soldiers to be halved.

"If you don't want to die, take off all clothes and lay upside down on the ground. The hands behind your head. If a single one runs away, we will kill 10 in his surroundings. The officers shall come forward. It will turn into a massacre if you lie. Speech except by the officers is prohibited. Disobedience in this will cause killing in the surroundings as well." (Kustaa)

As he actually kills several tens of people, Kustaa hastens the disarmament of the Imperial forces. They are tied up and their clothes and armours are collected. All of his colleagues were used to it from their business as mounted bandits.

"I-I am the vice-commanding officer of the Imperial Army's 208th Light Cavalry Battalion."

“What happened to the commanding officer?” (Kustaa)

“...He died in battle!”

“Tell me that guy’s name. Search for his corpse. There’s his equipment as well. Do it swiftly.” (Kustaa)

“Wh-... b-bastard! You asshole, the courtesy in war.”

“Shut up. The next time you unnecessarily open your mouth, I will kill 10 people besides you. Hurry up.” (Kustaa)

“...!!”

Having sent a fast messenger, they finished the basic work before he returned. The rope, which bound their hands behind their backs, was stretched over to the flesh-coloured people and they were lined up by linking them together. After enclosing the horses in a loose dead end, their bits and stirrups are also linked together by ropes. Also, apart from that, the 500 riders with Kustaa changed their equipment to that of the seized Imperial army’s light cavalry. The hoisted flag has the seal of a pterosaur. It’s the completion of improvised imperial forces.

“Okay, switch with the guys who came to take over the wounded. The same for the vacant positions. There are no more than 100 reserves. You lot, though it’s fine to be injured, take care to not die!” (Kustaa)

Kustaa passes his short rest by receiving reports from the companies and platoons. Without anticipating it, the messenger and transportation personnel arrived. They are made to head east after giving them prompt orders. After confirming that the prisoners staggeringly disappeared behind the hill, Kustaa advanced his horse towards the presence of his lord.

“They were a lukewarm bunch.”

“Since the main force of the empire is deployed towards the southern side, well, I guess that’s how it is.”

Accompanied by 99 riders with a red cloth, he, with the black hair and blue eyes, is showing a calm bearing on top of his horse’s back. Marko. He is the lord who constantly grants numbness of his premonitions to Kustaa. Having an eternally

unchanging expression, there's no blood smeared on the spearhead, he holds lightly, at first sight. However it was him whom Kustaa understand for sure. The unique spear method of drilling and piercing a single spot drawing a spiral of red on the handle without leaving blood on the blade. Kustaa was unable to suppress his smile.

"Next time let them get away at a suitable moment. Do you understand?" (Marko)

"It's an argument of may-not. At most I will try to recommend escape in an imperial dialect, yes." (Kustaa)

"Mmh? Did you have such special skill?" (Marko)

"I was taught somewhat by that Bertrand fellow. During the course of event's at a drinking bout in the village, yes." (Kustaa)

"...Ah, that brawling disturbance? Now that you mention it, you were provoked, weren't you?" (Marko)

"That's because I can put my devotion into words. There's no way he will get me angry like this. That asshole." (Kustaa)

While vowing in his heart to settle it privately in front of his lord, Kustaa spurred on his horse in order to accomplish his own mission. 500 riders follow after him. It's a disguised travel as the imperial army's light cavalry from a moment ago, thus they were conscious of the awkward speed and ranks for no particular reason. Concealing his fighting spirit at the bottom of his stomach, the idea of purposely having no feeling of tension surfaces in his mind. He felt like they were a carefree bunch.

At present Kustaa finished half of the third battle in the Plain of Wandering Calamity.

Heading towards a confrontation with an Imperial Army's regiment that has a strength of 3000 soldiers and consists of 1000 light cavalry and 2000 infantrymen, Kustaa's group plans to crush these numbers with just 1500 light cavalry. First the 500 riders including Kustaa lured in the enemy's light cavalry with their act of being clumsy and once they detached them from the infantry, they succeeded in assaulting them with 1000 riders in an ambush. Next the 500 riders will plunge into the enemy's infantry by disguising themselves as their allies and the remaining 1000 riders will attack the place which was thrown into confusion. That's the strategy. However, the outcome they are wishing for is to scatter the enemy to let them get away without killing too many of them.

Of course, that's not only for the sake of winning. It's one part of the plan of Marko. It's a deed similar to the objective of not returning to the front line fortress once after the Royal Guard Unit sortied. The fourth battle after this enemy was defeated is their true goal.

(Right, it's this. It's certainly because that person is battling in such way.)(Kustaa)

In the tight helmet of the imperial army, Kustaa was aware of his own face grinning broadly. Kustaa is conceited above average about his tactics in horse-riding. *A person who can go to war successfully to a degree that it surprises even me and is more skilled than such a me...* Such person is Kustaa's lord. It's Marko's place that is currently employing him.

There is something Marko declared before their sortie. "This time's sortie will spread the name of the Royal Guard Unit across the continent. There will be sacrifices, but by raising achievements no one else is able to, its existence will be carved into history." *That was excessively audacious and yet his declaration was filled with conviction. What made the Royal Guard Unit into one body was just this moment,* Kustaa recalls. *It was also a dearly missed scenery. Controlling the battle due to being made to believe in victory with those words by that child...* That person who mesmerized Kustaa and whom he admired was there at that place. It was no dream.

Preceding their sortie, a single rumour was circulated at the front line. According to it, the 3000 soldiers, who were splendidly beaten up by an Imperial Army's battalion the other day, were from that Sword Square Knight Order who has once again come back to the front line some time ago. It appears that Marquis Yurihalshira intends to deliver a strong blow to the Imperial Army on this occasion. He who makes light of growing old. The esteemed general of the country's defence is going strong.

It was a plausible rumour that the place, where their target has headed to, lies in the southern part of the Plain of Wandering Calamity. From the facts that it was after all the southern area where the knight order patrolled at the time of the previous battle and that the supply line towards Yurihalshira Margraviate is located on the southern side as well, it was a story everyone accepted as a supposedly natural fact. The rumour was spread in order for it to happen like that. By Marko and the others.

Yes, this is no more than a fabricated lie. However, it's a story everyone expects to likely be true. After the actual location itself was announced as the real spot of the Sword Square Knight Order to be stationed at the front line, it already changed into reality.

Furthermore, that rumour also circulated to the empire's side. We bought several prisoners for their trick so that it would be conveyed. I'm sure the other side has an intelligence network, too. The empire's side showed an instant reaction. That's because it's about Marquis Yurihalshira and the Sword Square Knight Order. Concentrating their patrolling units in the south, their precautions were strengthened and they were told to kill the imperious-seeming knight order on sight. Those might be correct measures. With them being just a little premature, they aren't wrong.

However, because it was far too early, Kustaa's group deeply invaded into the northern part of the Plain of Wandering Calamity while pushing back the empire now!

The inhospitality towards the Royal Guard Unit has affected this as well. Friendly troops aren't dispatched to the front. Something like a patrolling mission with independent corps has been thoughtlessly terminated by the kingdom's front line. However, that was intentional. Since the Royal Guard Unit has sortied to prove its "courage," nobody has been allowed to deliberately hinder that... the point of the sortie without reinforcements is reasoned by taking them at their word which has been adorned with such poison.

For this reason the rumour is more effective than the truth.

Currently the troops in the northern part of the Plain of Wandering Calamity are always scarce to an unbelievable extent. The enemy and their allies aren't here, as most of them are single-mindedly focussed in the south. Now that Kustaa's lot is camouflaged as an imperial army, it's only the 1000 riders, which include Marko, flying the White Dragon Flag.

Yes, even the main force of Akseli's Royal Guard Unit isn't in the northern part.

At the moment they sortied from the fortress, the Royal Guard Unit was marching while hoisting the White Dragon Flag with 3000 soldiers. And, when they encountered a patrolling unit of the Imperial Army it turned into their first battle. Akseli's unit's, Yalkho's unit's and Oiva's unit's 1500 soldiers linked up into a firm formation and confronted the enemy steadily on their first march as Royal Guard Unit.

Even for the Imperial Army it was a battle flag they have seen for the first time. Moreover, for an army they likely had in a sense unsophisticated movements. Being startled by the imperial army and having weak vigilance, the confrontation of armies dragged on without either side opening hostilities. That's because it was an unit that didn't look like a main force. Those of the Imperial Army, who have actual ability, were

in the southern part of the Plain of Wandering Calamity at that time. Even the royal army, to cope with that, used part of its military force in the south as well. Although it might be temporarily, the Imperial Army's battle array in the north is sparse and weak. Moreover they were unskilled, too. Since it was the first campaign of the Royal Guard Unit in the end, if you speak of the royal army that faced them, either side couldn't sneer at it. It wasn't an atmosphere where either could strike unreasonably.

And then, with Kustaa's light cavalry swooping down on the enemy ferociously, the enemy forces were routed.

The Imperial Army was completely unable to deal with the sudden change from laxness to crisis. Breaking through by going around and cutting into the right wing, their battle formation was torn to shreds while the enemy wasn't able to detach their attention from Akseli's group at the front. Especially the 100 riders led by Marko charged into the centre and rampaged. Due to Kustaa's lot coordinating with them in that, the enemy's losses were amplified into something enormous. In the end, with Akseli's 1500 just watching, it turned into an annihilation with just the 1500 light cavalry.

After contacting the supply unit, the Royal Guard Unit headed further west as is.

The second battle ended in victory in the exact opposite way of the first battle. This time the 1500 light cavalry disturbed the enemy forces as decoy and threw their pace out of order. And, while the enemy had their attention lured by that manoeuvre, Akseli's 1500 infantrymen clashed into them. At the location which was pierced with arrows and spears, the decisive action was the cavalry charge by the 500 heavy cavalry led by Akseli. Because it was the circling movement towards the enemy's rear by Kustaa's lot which produced that gap, it was a battle where the difference of duties in the first battle became apparent.

There were damages to the infantry unit as well. It was decided that the Royal Guard Unit would change their course at this point. They headed to the south. Given that they would simply withdraw, it bore the danger of drawing in the enemy. They wouldn't be able to gain time for the supply unit to withdraw either. Thus they slowly headed south while preparing something like a wooden fortress, albeit a simple one, and took up position there. That place was good for fighting and it was also nice for quietly pulling the enemy in after luring them suitably. They even didn't forget to dispatch messengers to the allied forces deployed in the south. Having already triumphed in two battles, they have succeeded in proving their "courage." There would be nothing

more left than dealing with it appropriately in case they were to be abandoned beyond this.

However, Kustaa isn't within that battle formation. Dashing towards the north once again as soon as the supplying finished, he shifted the neck of his horse towards deeper into the west. And, discovering patrolling enemy forces with low morale has turned into the third battle. Acting as if the 500 riders got lost, they threw their easy prey off guard. And, after luring the 1000 light cavalry riders, who were a sufficient horse-riding war potential, they destroyed them together with Marko's 1000 riders who were hidden.

Fighting up to here, the military operation is still in the middle of its progress.

At Kustaa's front the battle flags of the imperial army became visible. *The enemy is in a negligent, sorry state as it's an area where it's unthinkable for the royal army to appear. The soldiers have more or less formed into ranks, but they probably should be in a battle formation with a little more wariness after they were left behind by their cavalry war potential*, Kustaa is astonished. *Rather, shall we attack them just like this?*

Of course he won't do such thing. He knows. *I'm no more than a game piece on the board where the war is carried out by that person. A piece that can run well and kill well. If it moves selfishly, it will be likely forsaken cold-heartedly by that person. For that person war is in all respects rational. Involving the soldiers in a battle, which seems to be an attempt to amass luck with imprudence and being engrossed in front of the enemy, is something he loathes from the bottom of his heart.*

(...Well, that's why he probably failed in due course. It would be great if it was the opposite at least. That person and the hero guy.) (Kustaa)

While his chest aches a bit due to him recalling the old times, Kustaa opens his mouth widely. Standing up in the stirrup, while grabbing the reins in one hand since it's acting, he extends the other hand at the side of his mouth and shouts.

"Oouih! Stray enemies escaped! We arrested half of them as prisoners!" (Kustaa)

Kustaa smiled with a natural feeling. *For a lie that seems to be the truth it's wrong if all of it is a lie. Without blending truth into it, it doesn't feel real either. It's alright, the second half is true. It's fine for you guys to smile as well...* while ridiculing them like this in his heart.

“Since there’s also many horses, it’s difficult to travel. Let’s join up with the other party.” (Kustaa)

Since that was a complete lie, Kustaa understood that it gave birth to suspicions towards his own words. *I can grasp that from the expressions looking up this way. Yes... we are already at such close proximity.*

“Well, please join them in the world of the dead or somewhere else. With that half of it will turn into truth.” (Kustaa)

Fresh blood flew around while he wielded his spear. That continues all over. Surprise, angry roars, screams, grief... while those resounded, the infringement of the 500 riders began. On this side everyone is silent. Kustaa doesn’t have the time to raise his voice each and every time because he is killing. Words themselves are weapons. They create plans. Even from now on like this.

“Run away, it’s fine to escape! This place is already an extremely dangerous place! It’s a place dominated by death!” (Kustaa)

While yelling in the gaps between killing, Kustaa pondered as well. *How should I settle things with that man called Bertrand? I cannot afford to risk my life and it’s the same with my lord’s life. Either of us is a game piece of my lord. Killing between fellow game pieces will end in both sides being abandoned. If that’s the case, how can I teach him a lesson...? Does he rather want me to decide it primarily?*

Once he looks, Marko as one part of the 99 riders with red clothes has come galloping. *There we go, it’s the conclusion of the third battle,* Kustaa deepened his ferocious smile. While talking in imperial dialect, he wields his spear and kills moderately.

And, the fourth battle will be... the beginning of the conclusion of this sortie.

As result of it, Asuria Kingdom and Eberia Empire would become aware of the name of a single boy for his military fame.

Chapter 33

Because everything will fall apart

“What’s this about? Why is the royal army at such a place?”

“What happened to the units which went on patrol? They have left with 10.000, right!?”

“Who knows... how about requesting reinforcements? If we send a fast messenger...”

“What foolishness! We don’t even know the scale of the enemy!”

Oiva listens to the wild uproar of the imperial soldiers while sprawling on a wagon he uses as bedding. The blood, which he threw up on his abdomen, has permeated even below his clothes. It’s ticklish and crunchy making one wonder whether it has dried. While apologizing in his heart to those who had even their blood squeezed out until they were finally killed, he nevertheless wished for them to pardon him with just a plain revenge.

(It ain’t like I got the role of a corpse. I wonder whether it’s fine to even scratch this?)
(Oiva)

Keeping his eyes half-open, Oiva nonchalantly scratched his belly. Just at that moment his hand and belly are held down by someone. The clinking sound of a small knife being handled can be heard. Next it continued with the sensation of bandages and clothes being fastened. A quiet voice saying 「Please endure, commander. You can’t move yet」 fell into his ear. He displays his dissatisfaction with slow nasal breathing.

This is the north-western part of the Plain of Wandering Calamity, within one of the several existing front line fortresses of the Imperial army. The sky, which was cut into a square surrounded by walls, was a clear blue notwithstanding. Oiva even felt relaxed in the courtyard of hustle and bustle. He is exhausted from the forced march everyday. Just the itch is troubling.

“Damn! The enemy is a cavalry unit, you say!? What kind of enemy is it!?”

“It seems they are pretending to be our allies. The whereabouts of the 208th light cavalry battalion is unknown...”

“You are certainly not saying that they have betrayed us, are you!? Where are the patrolling units right now?”

“Don’t mention something like betrayal thoughtlessly! Even so, an officer? Bastard!”

The fortress’ confusion seems to be more than expected... Oiva leaks a “Hmm” through his nasal breathing. It was the result of the lower half of his face being covered with a cloth. He contemplates that he might break into a smile. *However, that probably can’t be helped*, he thinks. “The patrolling units” is probably about the 2 units which were crushed by the Royal Guard Unit. Oiva praises himself for obtaining as many military achievements as he wanted in regards to the second unit.

The defeat of two units in their first campaign. As only that is likely a glorious distinguished war service, the person, who is Oiva’s lord, is even now dashing ahead for the sake of obtaining what’s beyond that point. They had already destroyed a third unit. The victory had nothing to do with Oiva, but he is currently here by taking advantage of that victory.

“They were after all really... destroyed by an unit of the Royal army...”

“Don’t make any rash statements. Isn’t the Royal army’s main force in the south? I think there is only the aforementioned mish-mash unit in the north!”

“Well, however, weren’t they lined up in the vicinity of the centre?”

“Yes, that’s right. So you are saying that it was another unit?”

Oiva groans in his mind when he receives with his ears either of it, something he can’t let pass and something they believe to have been done. He is troubled since the good and bad details of Marko’s words are proving to be right.

An intelligence network has been laid out in the Asuria Kingdom by the Eberia Empire and the church is cooperating with them. The remark regarding the Royal Guard Unit verified that. This time they have spread rumours towards the empire’s side anticipating the sortie of the Royal Guard Unit. It’s rumours about Marquis Yurihalshira and the Sword Square Knight Order. Among those rumours, the situation of being unable to get reinforcements, and the battle array of the Royal Guard Unit

isn't included. *I don't know whether even the sortie schedule was circulated, but there's no mistake that information about the Royal Guard Unit was spread.* Oiva judged it like that.

Thus he chuckles beneath the cloth. As this is just right to conceal his expression, his smile deepens even further.

The second battle, where Oiva wielded his sword in high spirits... after it ended, the Royal Guard Unit lined up close to the centre of the Plain of Wandering Calamity after proceeding south. Building a wooden fortress, they lined up stoppers against cavalry and dug a moat. It might have been that time when the unit led by Oiva was at the peak of their enthusiasm. *No matter what, that unit has many hilarious folks,* Oiva believes.

Once they finished resupplying after going out to meet with the military supply unit, the Royal Guard Unit began a strategic mobilization of splitting in three parts.

One is the light cavalry unit led by Kustaa heading north. Proceeding west again in the northern part of the Plain of Wandering Calamity, they will invade even close to imperial territory. They have been able to confirm their opponent's unit in the third battle and have been requested to defeat an enemy twice as large. One can say it's a strategic unit with the highest level of danger, but with Marko accompanying them as if it's natural, it also brought something like confidence about the entire strategy to Oiva and the others.

Another part are the Akseli unit and Jarkko unit with the duty of standing by. Holing up inside the encampment, their role is to strongly impress the surroundings with the existence of Asuria Kingdom's Third Princess' Royal Guard Unit by staying active with lighting bonfires and flying battle flags. This has also the purpose of providing a path of retreat for the military supply unit, but more than anything the aspect of showing strength is large. It demonstrates that all members of the Royal Guard Unit intend to fight defensively there. Because of that, they conceal the existence of the detached forces.

The ones who were concealed are Kustaa's light cavalry and... Oiva's special operations unit.

Yes, the last strategic unit is Oiva's unit. All of them are wearing the equipment of imperial soldiers. Those are items seized from the "patrolling units." Currently Oiva and the others are gathering in small groups in the fortress as injured soldiers and

scattered units. The confusion wrapping up the fortress makes such a feat possible.

It was a confusion created by Marko.

A considerable number of the enemy soldiers, who were defeated in the first and second battle against the Royal Guard Unit, has escaped just as intended. In addition, it's only ordinary soldiers. Not a single officer got away. Having been scattered in a wide area, they were induced to aim for a single fortress despite that. Blending in with them, Oiva's group aimed towards the west. Rather, it even took the shape of them guiding the dispersed soldiers.

And, what became the finishing blow was the third battle. Routing the infantry, the ordinary soldiers were pushed towards the near proximity of the fortress by forcing them that way. The fortress experienced pandemonium. There was no chain of command or anything like that either. Since there are many injured soldiers, the entire fortress is covered with dust and the stench of blood. They don't even have the spare time to confirm the fortress' own units. In any case, the enemy has even approached close to the fortress and moreover it's said that it's a cavalry unit. There was fear that they would get attacked soon.

That's why Oiva is carefreely fighting his itching. He was still optimistic even though he was transported by being placed on a wagon because his physique stands out too much. Furthermore, because the unit members, who carried him, came up with the spot to place him on, it resulted in him being talked to by the officers of the fortress in the close vicinity. It's a situation to smile a lot if it's fine to do so.

(How far in the distance has our commander seen? I can't bear this... can't bear it!)
(Oiva)

It's Oiva who suddenly leaked his voice with a "Gufuh." After he was sharply pinched in the abdomen, his chin was raised as if having vomited blood. It's a measure to avoid suffocation by blood clogging up the throat. The skill of this unit member, who was told to be in charge of Oiva's nursing, is actually quite good. In regards to emergency treatment of injured soldiers on a battlefield... and in regards to killing the enemy in an assault.

An alarm bell rung.

A voice informing of an enemy attack resounded from atop the walls. Noise turned

into commotion and that commotion was mixed with groaning voices and screams. Oiva can't help but feel sympathy. Until he reached this fortress, he heard the voices of many imperial soldiers while swaying atop the wagon. Those, who spoke to him in worry after seeing the fake clotted blood, were also those who stated that they won't die until they return to their families. Everyone was a single human and everyone had a daily life.

Even so, they are soldiers. Oiva has abandoned them at that point.

From the beginning soldiers are sad beings. Their lives and deaths are much too transient. Being naturally controlled by their allies and being controlled by their enemy's soldiers, they have tried to live by slowly swaying just like fallen leaves swaying on the water surface of a river. Everyone's the same with no one being anything special. The battlefield is the place where they risk their own lives.

For this reason... , Oiva put his hand on the sword that was lying under his body. Tracing the scabbard, he arrives at the hilt. As it was covered in a cloth, he entwined his fingers in it. He has a battle feeling burning in his chest with only that. That's the meaning of a person taking a steel blade into their hands. The hardness which cannot exist in a body of flesh unifies mind and body, hones the mind and makes the soul burn.

Once you find yourself holding that for a moment, you should immediately make up your mind.

"Flames! It's a fire!"

Someone yelled. Orange colour blows from all barracks and they are enveloped by smoke. Even close to Oiva something was violently burning. Sparks danced in his field of vision alongside the scent of oil. *All right, it's beginning!*

He draws his sword while standing up.

He strikes with his sword while plunging in.

The head of an imperial army officer, who was petrified, danced in the air. Returning the katana, he lowers it and cuts deeply from the root of a adjutant-like man's neck down to the abdomen. As he tried to kill one more, he discovered that the tip of a sword was piercing through that man's throat. It's Oiva who secretly watches the natural resemblance to the moment when he raised his chin due to the shock of pinching. The unit member, who stabbed him, is skilled after all.

“It’s a fire! This fortress is already a lost cause!” (Oiva)

Roaring that, Oiva ran around while slaying the imperial soldiers, who picked up their weapons even though being confused, one by one. There are also old people. There are also young people. If there’s men, there’s also women. However, if they chose to fight by taking up their weapons, there is no difference about them attempting this or that. He kills. He runs, cuts and kills. The blood and fire are bright red. He fights while the stench of iron rust and the smell of burning despair is wafting about tangibly and intangibly. He does his very best in war.

After someone of Oiva’s group opened the gate, this fortress is already ruined.

What he saw was Kustaa rushing in at the head. Routing the bewildered imperial soldiers, they have gained total control of the courtyard in the twinkling of an eye. Despite being amazed by his way of spurring his horse, Oiva plunges into a building of the fortress. The identification whether friend or foe is a hand signal and the red cloth wrapped around a wrist. Those resisting are killed. Those running away are left alone. And fire is set. There are those running around while holding torches. They should also possess oil. It’s the unit members with the role of arson.

“It’s a fire!! It’s hopeless already! This fortress will end up getting burned!!”

Oiva raised a loud voice with all his strength. Before realizing, the unit members, who were in the vicinity, nod to each other and run to the fortress’ stables. Unit members are already preparing the harnesses on horses over there and Oiva’s group straddled on those one after the other.

“Alriiiight! Since the preparations are complete, go! Our last job is to return alive!” (Oiva)

There were no imperial soldiers to be found in this fortress, which was dominated by black smoke and heat due to the fires, for Oiva to fight against anymore. There’s no one who wants to get burned to death. This late in the game everyone has no other choice but to run in order to stay alive. People die outside rather than dying within the flames. No one will have the idea of wishing for something like that.

Oiva was made to gallop on a horse once again, too. The arsoning, which had no mercy, is transforming the fortress into a sea of flames. Even while thinking 「They have gone too far」, Oiva also has the expectation 「If it’s them, it’s impossible for them to be

late in escaping」. The heat broke through and rushed outside the fortress.

Marko was there.

He is on horseback while being accompanied by the 99 red-clothed riders. Even as he is illuminated by the colour of flames, he gazes at the fortress while not moving an inch. He tried to call out to him wondering whether he was waiting for someone, but Oiva was unable to mutter even a single word.

There was no expression on Marko's face.

That's when Oiva noticed for the first time. Marko always revealed various expressions. Many are smiling ones. Even without that, having his look quietly gaze at someone or somewhere, didn't disturb that cool atmosphere no matter what happened in front of him. Oiva was made to feel Marko's profound depth as a transcendental.

What about now? He couldn't sense any strength, depth or even any kind of colour from the current Marko. He seems to be entirely like an abandoned dagger. As if it was discarded to be exposed to the weather without even maintenance or being some kind of treasured, matchless dagger, its body is gnawed at for years and before long its sharpness, brightness and everything else ends up swallowed. As if he is in the middle of that, as if he has lost something precious, he stood there with a deterioration similar to the breath of despair.

Oiva made his horse advance. He looked at Marko's face. He doesn't even blink as only flames are reflected in his pupils matched by his braided black hair alongside his blue eyes. There was no light dwelling within. It was as if they have been burned.

"...Oi, Marko." (Oiva)

He called out to him. It held a feeling of calling out to someone in the distance.

"Oi, Marko. Do you hear me? Marko, hey... Marko!" (Oiva)

While gradually strengthening his voice, Oiva largely placed his own body in front of Marko's eyes. Against the backdrop of the fortress' large fire, the mounted boy was wrapped up in shadows. The flames within his pupils disappeared and only still blue remained. It was a state similar to that of a sculpture. Oiva addresses him. It wasn't a thoughtful action.

“Marko! The operation is finished, but it still ain’t the end!? You understand, right?”
(Oiva)



At last he extended his hand and grabbed Marko's shoulder. He merely grabs the shoulder, which is still unexpectedly delicate, without shaking it. He wanted to convey something through his hand. He believed that it's something to be conveyed.

"Oi, Marko! Come back! Do you intend to leave us behind!?" (Oiva)

Those were words whose meaning Oiva himself didn't comprehend. However, they were sincere. He has made a vow with Marko. Towards the future where Marko is heading... he was a person who began to walk through life towards some far journey. Now that he was aware of that fulfilment, he can't return anymore. He doesn't want to return. Oiva had no intention at all to go back to those days where he sulked in bed with booze in his hands. That's why he stacked up powerful words.

"Not yet, right!? Marko, it shouldn't be yet! It's definitely not yet!!" (Oiva)

He repeatedly shouted cryptic words, however, it definitely had an effect on the boy. He blinked in succession and light was lit in his blue eyes. Expression returned to his face. Having tightened his lips, which were opened slightly, he produced a smile.

"...Sorry, I dreamed for a bit. It seems that I was affected by the heat of the flames." (Marko)

It was Marko. Anything and everything coming back then and there, the 13 years old Marko smiled in that place. Although Oiva was happy, he also lost his bearing at the same time. Oiva suffered a hallucination as if having spent quite the long time.

"Well then, let's run. Nothing has ended yet after all." (Marko)

Turning the neck of his horse towards the east, he began to gallop. He gallops while being basked in the heat of the flames in the back. He gallops even as he gets further away and the air cools down. Yes, the strategy still hasn't finished. Only death is waiting if they stop here. Oiva looked at the back with a glance. The fortress, which has gradually become distant, seems to be a bonfire lit at daytime. Smoke rises higher and higher.

...Like this the first campaign of Asuria Kingdom's Third Princess' Royal Guard Unit has come to an end.

They were able to procure huge military gains, now, in the Plain of Wandering Calamity where it was just the beginning of the war. Because those achievements were

too enormous, neither Asuria Kingdom nor Eberia Empire were able to cope with it immediately. They rejected it as those believing in common sense. The facts in front of them were too absurd to accept them for what they are. That wasn't unusual.

Three regiments of the Imperial army numbering 10.000 soldiers were crushed.

Overwhelming 1.800 prisoners.

The captured warhorses number overwhelming 2.900.

A great number of plundered items.

And... the destruction of the Imperial army's northern front-line fortress.

At the time the military gains became definitely visible, they turned into a roaring thunder that caused a huge shock in both countries. The name of Asuria Kingdom's Third Princess' Royal Guard Unit has been etched into history. The dreadfulness of its first campaign made future historians admire them and at the same time likely made them cock their heads in puzzlement. Why was such a thing possible? Was such a thing really possible? The historians don't know about it, the shape of that truth, its horror.

At that time Marko's name was merely added as the lowest seat of the Royal Guard Unit. The commander is Akseli to the bitter end. Kustaa is the commander of the detached forces. In military records and tactic history one will only find those two names. Marko's reality was never specified there.

And yet his military fame has become known. The boy from a frontier region, who devoted himself to the princess, he with his youthfulness of 13 years, fought to the bitter end as one rider of the light cavalry unit. Crossing the Plains of Wandering Calamity with merely 1.500 riders, he is one of those who broke into an empire's fortress. To say nothing of it being something tremendous as it was officially their first campaign. He is known in a shape far distant from the truth and yet Marko obtained fame.

However, among those living in the same era and breathing the same battlefield air... there are. There are people who began to notice something, sensing a physical disorder. The person, who was the first in the Eberia Empire, was called by the name Terencio Balcello. His rank is that of a Lieutenant Colonel in the Imperial army. He commands a light cavalry unit numbering 1.500 riders.

That man was known for his nickname, “Blacksnake.”

Chapter 34

Snake extermination is something that requires much effort

“It was done flashily as well.”

Surveying the fortress which had collapsed under the heat and was smeared with soot, the man's impressions ended with only those words. His equipment is that of an Imperial army's light cavalryman and a black overcoat is gently concealing the body of a soldier. There isn't a fraction of warmth left in his eyes. He just gazes out at the place looking as if he doesn't care about the smouldering fire all over.

Lieutenant Colonel Terencio Balcello of the Imperial Army.

Once he commanded a cavalry regiment as a Colonel of the Imperial Army. He is a man who accumulated distinguished war services at various places in Asuria Kingdom. He is also feared under the alias “Blacksnake” by the kingdom's soldiers for his ferocious battle style. That name is never used by imperial soldiers. They fear his strength in the same way as the kingdom, but they are afraid of what others may think about them using an alias with an origin relating to colour.

“...It's a profane story.”

The added word is the reason for that. With him being generally accepted as a miser, he makes it a principle to be frugal about everything in his life. Even though he has the position of a field officer, his necessities in life are no different from those of a common soldier. It's to the degree that he, who doesn't consider in the slightest something like wanting to have his own home, even relinquishes the official residence for a field officer and sleeps together with the ordinary soldiers. Hating pointless expenses for the unit he leads himself, he makes use of things like pots until a hole opens at the bottom.

On the other hand, regarding expenses he judged to be necessary, he won't be stingy at all. He will expend heaps of money that was saved by each of his frugalities. For example, the meals of his unit are known for being extravagant. Plenty of meat and

vegetables are thrown into the worn-out pots, too. The quality of their war horses has been enhanced by him adding his private property.

One among such expenses are black overcoats for night attacks. It's what's currently wrapped around him. It's a high-class item. Having a dyed, flexible fabric of fine quality, light won't be reflected even if it shines on the overcoat. It's a custom item for the sake of raising the probability of success for a night attack even by a small amount.

However, the quality was too fine. Even when equipped all the time, the feeling of wearing it was too good. It's sturdy and its level of retaining heat is high as well. Moreover, since the appearance is awe-inspiring too... it ended up being established as the unit's uniform. A "snake's" colour being "black" is true. For the imperial army it's a ridiculous story and thus there's certainly no way for them to call him something like "Blacksnake" as if teasing him with that.

Matching with the items supplied for every soldier's equipment, it's just the overcoat which is deep black and elegant... Balcello walks through the burned fortress. The two men, who follow him, have also the same appearance. The overcoat's black being enough to inform anyone of their relation to him as subordinates.

"It looks like they were assaulted by light cavalry. Their numbers are around more than 1.000 but less than 2.000. They hoisted the aforementioned, white, long, peculiar thing as a battle flag."

"You can consider them to be a detached force of the Third Princess' Royal Guard Unit. In the rumours it was said that it's a mishmash unit which has been treated the same as something swollen, but why is that so? They seem to be a powerful unit."

Balcello listened, without appearing to do so, to the details his two subordinates talk about in turns. A strong stench of scorched earth is attached to the air of the fortress. It was also the stench of battle.

"However... even though they are the enemy, that's a splendid feat. Though it took the shape of them being helped by the fortress' disorder, they were able to burn this place as a result. For example, even if the other side destroys themselves, it's plenty of war merit to add pressure on the opponent so that it turns out like that."

"Indeed. The encampment we raided was completely empty. We have to consider the necessity of closely watching the unit leader... the general called Akseli Anel from now

on. Originally he was rumoured to be a feudal army lieutenant though.”

Without even answering, Balcello walks among the grounds of the fortress. Avoiding the wreckage, he occasionally steps across it. The fortress was in a situation with no hope of rebuilding where only a simple search for the injured was carried out. With the army higher-ups being in considerable chaos, Balcello being here is the result of an order, that a unit should be stationed here at least, having been handed down. Leaving behind the infantry unit, he went ahead, but the only thing he could see in his eyes was damage beyond expectation.

Asuria's Royal Army had destroyed a military base of the Eberia Empire's army.

Even if it's just one of many front-line fortresses in comparison, it's a fact that the Imperial Army's dignity was greatly damaged. Even Balcello felt like sighing. It's fine to say that the empire, which lost the entire main force in the previous war, put all its energy into the rebuilding of its army in these ten-odd years. Crushing the royal army in a renewed battle, they want to advance towards the east and south on the road they travelled once. The war potential has been improved with a stance of national unity that it will work out this time for sure.

And then, although it's just the opening, it's such a crushing defeat in the north. By just sounding out each other while sending forth patrol units, it was supposed to be a battle strategy of pushing and reeling in small victories and defeats. It seems like the army's upper echelon had some different plans as well, but beyond the opening of hostilities happening accidentally in such a way, the future should have silently advanced towards a war without any dramatic happenings, Balcello thought.

“As a matter of fact, the Royal Guard Unit appears to be an elite unit of the Royal Army. Having three consecutive battles with units of the same size before arriving at the fortress, all of them were crushing victories. Or it might be a unit hand-picked and nurtured by royalty.”

“If that's the case, the deviation with the prior information might be something that was intentional. The unit's objective is to lift the morale of the army or to be used as a trump card in battles... in any event, a unit appeared that we can't ignore.”

A dreadful enemy came out, Balcello reacted to somewhat confusing memories. There's the aspect of him already being aware of the Sword Corner Knight Order's existence which is famous for being a tough enemy. In reality, he confronted them as well. It was

a splendid army that didn't betray its fame. Going by his pride, he can't believe them to be an opponent they can't win against. However, they were a military power which made him make his resolve for a considerable number of losses.

Even this time's events are a series of circumstances twisting his own departure to the front after hearing about them appearing in the south. Normally Balcello is indifferent towards such grand battles, but also encountering urgent circumstances on this occasion, it would be unreasonable. It's been viewed as a problem that they withdrew without even battling against the knight order they encountered the other day. *In that situation it was correct to retreat after gathering our allies*, Balcello assesses. It's something that was temporarily acknowledged by the army's top brass as well, but what caused a problem is it being Balcello's action and not someone else's.

He was ostracised by the emperor. Back in the old days and now as well. And very likely from now on, too.

"The enemy forces, which stormed the fortress, apparently only took away the horses without having eyes for property and without taking prisoners."

"While they are our enemy, I believe it to be a proper judgement. It would have been impossible to keep up the occupation of the fortress. They would have likely been captured by a unit that assisted the fort if they had increased their baggage. Going by their numbers, there was no other choice but to escape. If it's horses, they can pull the reins without decreasing their mobility."

The stable's remains were also in a miserable state. Balcello touched the wreckage here for the first time. Moving it with his feet, making way with his hands, he searched for something while getting dirty and black. After taking a bit of time, he knew what he didn't find. Standing up, he brushes off the dirt from his knees.

"There are no remains of harnesses. They apparently moved after mounting the horses." (Balcello)

Saying that he turned his body around and began to walk.

"The ones who stole the horses were infantrymen. The enemy, who was here, wasn't just light cavalry. It appears as if the chaos in the fortress was a manoeuvre by the enemy's infantry." (Balcello)

Even without a reply, he knew that they are seriously listening right behind him.

“Since there are no eyewitness reports of enemy infantry, we can deduct that this is something according to a certain person’s plan. Because there’s information that the enemy pretended to be the Imperial army’s light cavalry, there might have been an identical plan for the infantry as well. Well, I don’t believe that they were able to enter the fortress that simply even if they imitated our clothes, but...” (Balcello)

Speaking ambiguously with a sigh at the end of the words, Balcello recalled the state of the empty encampment in his mind. With the Royal Guard Unit’s battle formation there, it’s a place that frequently sent messengers to royal army units in the southern Plain of Wandering Calamity. Balcello, who was ordered to attack it since it was an eyesore, wasn’t able to find even a single soldier within that encampment which was constructed effectively, while plainly.

Contrary to expectations they weren’t there. So, where did they go? Were they inside this fortress? He suggests. But he realized that it was impossible going by the time and distance. *I don’t know whether it was an empty encampment from the very start, but the enemy was definitely there.* Before Balcello’s group came running, scouts of the imperial army have encountered the enemy in camp. *Also, judging by the rising of smoke, the encampment was filled with numbers that can’t be in the 10s or 100s. There’s no mistake in that.*

“...At any rate, it seems to be a unit that knows cavalry well.” (Balcello)

There were arrangements against cavalry densely set up in the vicinity of the empty encampment. Well deployed fences protecting against horses, a good way of digging a dry moat, that encampment could be seen as biased towards defending, Balcello judges. *That’s not unrelated to the matter of all of the light cavalry having left as a detached force. Didn’t they want to particularly block the empire’s mobility while secretly having retreat in mind?* He wonders.

“They have stolen the enemy’s horses and the infantrymen used those. Setting up camp, they protected the enemy’s horses. And, they took their enemies by surprise using a detached force consisting of only riders. Even in the series of battles with the imperial army’s forces they apparently obtained victory by capitalizing on the mobility of light cavalry.”

There are things one can understand by forming them into words. Balcello regarded the enemy corps called Royal Guard Unit as an army mainly consisting of cavalry. *Even so, they aren’t heavy cavalry like a knight order, but light cavalry apparently placing their*

focus on tactics. Among all components regarding battle, it means they are an army that attached particular importance to mobility.

“They are an enemy completely... like us.”

“I believe so as well. Which reminds me, wasn’t the general called Akseli Anel a cavalry commander of the feudal army?”

While letting the words of his two subordinates sink into his ears, Balcello felt a strange sense of discomfort. Thinking of the enemy’s praiseworthy deed, there is a faint nostalgia remaining in his chest at times. *While being the enemy, their military gains are nothing but amazing... and, on the other hand, thinking that it’s not something you can aim for, I remember that there was once a man who forcefully aimed for such military gains.*

“...Where was the leader of the Royal Guard Unit?” (Balcello)

That was an unusual act for Balcello. He rarely asked his subordinates a question. He allows them to make various remarks, but he derives a conclusion after storing all of it within himself. *I want my subordinates to execute my orders completely unselfishly. If they go against the unit’s standard, I will execute a severe punishment beyond military law. Conversely, if they raise achievements, I will prepare special rewards that go beyond military law. That’s the reason why I’m diligently amassing wealth and it’s connected to the improvement of the unit’s war potential,* Balcello believes.

“Up to the second battle his figure, leading heavy cavalry in the centre of the unit, has been witnessed. As for the third time, the enemy was only the light cavalry, but... well...”

“Heavy cavalry was confirmed in that encampment. Did they alter the armament? Or, did he change the unit he led...?”

It seems the deciding piece of information is missing. Of the units, which were deployed in the northern Plain of Wandering Calamity, many officers didn’t return, and it was mostly just ordinary soldier who made it back alive. That made the accuracy of the intelligence decline drastically. It’s said that there are also many soldiers who are still scattered and haven’t returned yet. They might have ended up running away just like that.

“Make sure of it. Was the leader at the encampment? Or did he lead the detached

force?”

One of the subordinates darted away after bowing to Balcello. Outside the fortress Balcello's unit is building a camp-site. *I wonder whom I will send on a fast horse towards the south?*

“Which was the main force? That's what it means?”

“...The way to look at it changes depending on where he was.”

Avoiding to explain any further than that, Balcello made progress towards a section of the mountain of wreckage. Coming across relatively large embers, a wooden pillar, which probably supported a stone, is flickering with orange colour and a small glimmer. He gazes at that.

There was a person he recalls in the former colour of fire.

There was a man who gave the soldier called Balcello the impression that he can't win unless he makes a disadvantageous bet using his own life. A war genius possessing strategic eyes exceeding Balcello's and tactical eyes at the same rank of Balcello. The arch-enemy of the Eberia Empire who devoted himself to killing a great number of imperial nobles, with the crown prince as first on the list, with his troops. And a sinner who was sentenced to death by burning at the hands of the Asuria Kingdom as an evil man who killed the hero.

Salomon Hahato.

In the previous war, Balcello confronted Salomon three times. He wasn't able to win a single time. He didn't lose on the side of tactics, but those were just battles where he lost strategically once he included the outlook of future effects. And, no matter what battle it was, Balcello kept the outcome unsettled as he didn't make a mistake in the moment to quit. In other words, it was substantially close to a defeat. If he showed even a bit of greed, it would have likely resulted in him taking large damage.

Balcello remembered such a man. He is reminded of his former arch-enemy due to the military gains of the Royal Guard Unit. They are military gains which Balcello can't believe could be aimed for even assuming he was in the royal army. *It's probably absolutely impossible if they weren't assisted by coincidence countless times. However, Salomon is definitely a person who pulls off such uncommon situations.*

Balcello recalls in fear. *That battle, where the imperial army's main force was completely annihilated, including the crown prince... who except Salomon is able to lead such a battle? It's impossible for Balcello. To say nothing of it being impossible for that hotspur called hero or such.* In that meaning, even Balcello was somewhat able to agree with the church branding Salomon as an evil man. *I see, he wasn't a normal human after all was he?*

There were hints of that man.

At the time when he figured out all of the actions of the Royal Guard Unit, Balcello felt somewhat nostalgic. *One battle after the other connecting to the next battle, they have established a result in the end that one couldn't imagine before the first battle. Completely as if using the ideal way of deploying light cavalry... it's an offensive movement that can't be stopped if it's made to advance once.*

Balcello tasted this countless times in the past, too. That's what it means to fight against Salomon. It was like resisting spiritual pressure that won't be stopped by the battle spirit of one army. In reality, his intestines got chilled as well. The matter of Balcello not being at the location of that horrible great annihilation battle isn't something he aimed for. It was no more than coincidence.

That man died. Balcello prays silently for that in his heart. He hated to be swayed by a dead man. *A battlefield is a place where life and death can be easily reversed, thus those, who feel drawn to the deceased, have their life pulled to that boundary. Wishing the dead complete happiness in the next world while exceeding the limitations of countries, it will be fine as long as I fight only the living with as much power as possible. In the first place, since the numbers are overwhelmingly larger on the side of the dead than the living, it won't do unless the living continue to be the leading actors of the world as they possess a strong will.*

However, similar things are similar. If he experienced it once, he won't be able to forget about it. Balcello doesn't know what kind of person the man called Akseli Anel is. *If that man led the light cavalry and rushed into the fortress, he might be a person similar to Salomon,* he believes. *That's because the crux of the series of strategies lies in that charge.*

If that fortress didn't fall, the light cavalry or the lined-up soldiers would probably have returned alive. It's just a short time for the northern part of the Plain of Wandering Calamity to be in a state of military vacuum. Furthermore, with it being

something temporary, the imperial army put in a lot of war preparation into mobile war potential including Balcello. If a fortress was exposed to an attack, they would immediately move at high speed and probably attack the units, which were exhausted from continuous battles, one by one. They wouldn't let them get away.

Even so, since the fortress fell and was burned, it's a chaotic situation. The imperial army moved its deployment in order to at least protect the other fortresses. It's a superb tactic to hit an aspect the enemy has to deal with, but this time's actions of the Royal Guard Unit can be said to have succeeded at a scale extending over the whole area of the Plain of Wandering Calamity.

That's why it won't do if Balcello doesn't confirm it. The matter where the man called Akseli was at. *If he was in the encampment, this time's military gains are completely a product of coincidence. A detached force merely captured a fortress unexpectedly after being assisted by luck. It won't be a problem at all if I regard it like that,* Balcello assesses. Whichever it was, he wanted to know it immediately.

The fire burst open.

Confronted by the strange pattern of the way that spark dispersed, it brought a single premonition along.

He noticed that there was yet another possibility. Balcello tried to laugh it off, but he kept watching the fire unable to do so. *The other possibility, which glittered like a spark... that is, the existence of someone, who led the detached force and who is the true commander. It's possible that there's a person who planned that series of battles. It seems foolish, but it's not uncommon to begin with. If they tried to obtain those military gains by planning to do so. And, the military gains of the Royal Guard Unit have been mostly accomplished by the light cavalry. The key to everything lies in their mobility.*

(No way, have you still not died within the flames? Or...) (Balcello)

Balcello continued to stare.

Within those embers, it is as if Salomon has left something behind.

Chapter 35

The Church also seems to be busy in various ways

“Good gracious! What to say! Look, it’s not because I’m surprised.”

Sensing something like cynicism in the man’s frivolous manner of speaking, Eleonora threw the folding fan, which she held, at him. She aimed for his face but hit his belly. The fan easily dropped to the ground. There’s no doubt that she was able to inflict slight pain to his bulging, fat belly. He grits his teeth to the limit.

“It cannot be helped even if you get angry at this humble priest. Ah, knock off the throwing of baked sweets. As this humble priest will indifferently eat even things that fell to the ground, it will just show the search for fodder by a pig which grew fat, won’t it? You hate that, right? Something ridiculous like that.”

In that case, I want to erase that faint smile of his first, Eleonora desired, but his expression likely won’t change even if there’s just the head left of him, she judges. Even so, shall I try to fire him...? She hesitated for a brief moment, but calmed herself down by tasting some tea. It’s no good. If I kill this man, it will result in the church becoming my enemy.

Joakim Beck.

Being a bishop of the eastern church, he is the man who controls the central diocese in the Asuria Kingdom. The church staff in the royal capital, and the territories of the Four Marquis, are all his subordinates. The scope of his influence reaches far and wide, and also deeply. Having connections to the miracle research division, there’s no mistake that he will be chosen as the next Archbishop of the East.

And he is also the man who, in the past, ordered Salomon’s burning at the stake during the “Festival of the Holy Flames.” Since he is a person who rose to fame inside the church due to those achievements, he is a deeply connected partner of Eleonora.

“...Can’t you handle it somehow even now?” (Eleonora)

“Hoo? You telling me to make a unit, which earned unprecedented military gains,

depart to the front to act as forlorn force once more? Drop that, it makes no sense. They have their bodies basked in the ovations of the officers and men right now, don't they? I wouldn't know what would happen if we made them depart forcibly. To begin with, you don't possess the right to order the Royal Guard Unit, do you? Right? Give up on it." (Joakim)

Eleonora was disgusted by each and every single of his expressions and gestures. It's unreasonable to tell her to not harbour any killing intent towards him, on the days where his lip service was pointed at her, as if she's a little girl, in addition to him making his flesh droop and scattering his sweat around. She grabbed a small knife from the silverware on impulse, but that was stopped by a hand which was extended from behind her.

"Wrong, Eleonora. That's wrong."

"...I know." (Eleonora)

She exhales her fury. Being comforted by the cool hand of her husband, Eleonora calmed herself slowly. *It was correct to have my husband accompany me on the occasion of meeting with Beck*, she thinks. His existence, which follows her quietly in crucial times, was something indispensable for Eleonora.

"Look, a harmonious married couple is nice. I believe that it can be seen as a form of god's esteemed divine protection, yes." (Joakim)

"...You wouldn't be able to get married even without your job." (Eleonora)

"No, no! Not at all! Aren't there marriages for ugly men while being such? Otherwise it would have been impossible for this humble priest to be born into this world in the first place. Because the world has been created well and carefully. The fact of this humble priest's existence serves as proof of god's existence. Well, how wonderful." (Joakim)

Anger wells up within her just after she calmed herself. Eleonora withstood it by keeping her consciousness focussed on the palm of her husband. *I can't tolerate this man called Beck no matter what it takes. I believe it wasn't like that when I met him for the first time, but since that execution by fire, he has this manner which makes me wonder each time why he got so conceited.* It was Eleonora's misfortune that this man has settled down in the capital as the contact person of the church. However,

intervening in the church's affair is impossible even for the King.

The church has evolved into the third power of the continent. It's also the oldest power on the continent if one peruses history.

The Asuria Kingdom and the Eberia Empire aren't capable of wielding their power without the church's goodwill. The church exists since ancient times when small countries crowded the continent. Even during the establishment of hegemony in the west, and even at the creation of royalty in the east, the church secured its role as the state religion of both countries by accomplishing important contributions in both cases. From the church's point of view, the kingdom and the empire are no more than newcomers on the continent.

However, those who are furious, are furious after all. Sending the tea into her belly while she's boiling, she put her breathing in order to once again denunciate the pig in front of her eyes. She is angry.

"Are you not capable of using the empire's army?" (Eleonora)

"Look, that has become difficult. It's not like we told them a lie with the information regarding the Royal Guard Unit, but... if you look at the results now, a lie is a lie and it turned into a big lie. Quite the complaints appeared as well. It seems that they ended up becoming obstinate in their attitude, too. Given that the church over there has no trust in the church over here... right?" (Joakim)

His way of revealing his tongue for a fleeting moment was disgusting. However, even Eleonora can agree with the content of his words.

The empire, which had complete victory in sight against the kingdom, became hostile towards the church after it supported the kingdom when it was in danger of collapse.

The church declared that all of the faults of the continent's disturbances lied with the evil man. Due to that, both sides reached a cease-fire agreement, but while that might be true, it won't turn into a reason for the empire to restore its trust in the church, she believes.

"...Humph, the imperial army is pathetic, too." (Eleonora)

"It's completely as you say. Well, there are some aspects where I should show sympathy though." (Joakim)

“Such a thing... where do you have that?”

Eleonora regretted having said something like that right away. The man in front of her eyes is a creature similar to a pig that wears the clothes of a bishop, but she sensed that the light of joy turned on in his eyes.

“That is, of course I have ((compassion)), too! This humble priest doesn’t stop showing sympathy, yes!” (Joakim)

His spit soars. Eleonora had goosebumps.

“Starting with the crown prince, weren’t prominent nobles, influential military commanders and elite forces altogether killed by the evil man? In fact, it’s praiseworthy to rebuild their military strength within ten-odd years and putting it in order, even if it’s paltry and incompetent compared to their past military strength... well, though they rebelled against the august kingdom from then on... they devoted immense effort while yearning for that. By no means did I plan in my wildest dreams to take the wind out of their sails in such a manner! Moreover, since it’s an attack by forces that hoist the flag of royalty, this might already be a nightmare! Yes!” (Joakim)

The pig, who rattles on, had apparently plenty of fun.

“Does that benefit the church as well? This is a slightly unacceptable situation, Your Highness! If I remember correctly, this humble priest did warn you, right? Putting aside if it’s about other matters, I told you to not do anything about the circumstances at the front-line without consulting with this humble priest! I did say that, didn’t I? I told you! And what did you do? As result of your sham strategy to crush the Royal Guard Unit in the Plains of Wandering Calamity, the exact opposite of your wish ended up happening, right!?” (Joakim)

The monster in front of her eyes seemed to be big. No, has the world been surrounded by monsters?

“You might have won if you made the Royal Guard Unit into a target for slander! But now they have become an unit which is carefully watched by the empire the most, as the kingdom’s heroic unit. Upsetting the flow of the battles with disorder, the empire strengthened its distrust towards the church! It’s a troublesome story, isn’t it, Your Highness the First Princess Eleonora! You made the war change into something unpredictable with your trivial obstinacy!” (Joakim)

I wonder what that is which was pushed out, Eleonora pondered. It was the index finger of the pig bishop, clogged up with meat and decorated with a ring.

“It appears that you hate Her Highness Princess Paulina quite a bit, but stop searching for the resolution of those emotions at the front-line. This is a demand from the church. If you want to do something to her, do it in a safe location inside the kingdom. I won’t help you, but shall this humble priest now offer you a suggestion on how to handle it in a slightly skilful manner? It’s because you have a degree of imprudence, too.” (Joakim)

“The assassin, which you hid in the front-line fortress, will be dealt with by our side”, she hears those words faintly. Eleonora didn’t know whether she is sitting or standing. The only certainty was the temperature of her husband’s hand. She clings onto it. She felt as if she would fall somewhere dreadful if she parted from this hand.

“Well, the church shares the opinion that these allies are an eyesore, thus it’s probably alright if we deal with them during their daily lives. Let’s work together with them for now. However, keep the harassing attitude. Since the story will end once they become isolated, well, it’s not like I like deliberately reeking of blood.” (Joakim)

*At the end there was a sound of *zu zu*. There’s the sound of tea being slurped. In case of a pig that’s as similarly ill-mannered, the licking with the tongue while making splashing sounds is suitable*, she thinks. *I want to insult him like that*. Sitting on a chair, Eleonora returned to herself. Unpleasant sweat flowed down her spine.

“Which reminds me, did you hear the amusing story?” (Joakim)

Beck said smoothly, before releasing the words from his open mouth. There’s a light of inquisitiveness in his eyes.

“It seems that an unofficial written questionnaire was delivered to the church from the empire before the outbreak of this time’s war. Its contents are thrilling. There are some untrue parts regarding the hero’s legend, and there are claims to clear up those passages in regards to their dramatized aspects. And it says that they will teach us the truth. Oh dear, it’s a truly accursed questionnaire.” (Joakim)

Eleonora’s field of vision warped effortlessly. Once she realized, she yelled.

“There’s something like falsehood, they say!? Dramatization, they say!? Hero-sama fought righteously and bravely! He saved the kingdom’s future in a graceful and proud

manner! He was killed by everyone... everyone ganging up on him!! Without saving Hero-sama, everyone pushed him away to dangerous places... they kept him away from me! And he ended up getting killed! It's already impossible for me to meet him! If that's not the truth, what is then?!!" (Eleonora)

She stood up. Looking down on the foolish lump of meat, she continued.

"I won't forgive. I won't permit anything and everything. Not just the empire, but the kingdom is repulsive, too. It's intolerable that people, who should have died before Hero-sama, are living carefree lives. The nobles, the commoners, everyone... together they aren't even valuable enough to make up for Hero-sama sacrificing his life for them! Everyone, it would be great if everyone was burned!!" (Eleonora)

There was a buzzing in her ears. She had a headache. In addition, mixed with a dizziness, just about everything lost its border line as it got hazy. Even so, her chest and cheeks were heated up by her rage. Eleonora didn't stop.

"The empire is... the empire is sinful. It won't do unless it's destroyed. Since they became infidels while scorning Hero-sama, it's wrong if they aren't burned completely. I will intentionally wait for that. I don't have any interest in a battlefield where Hero-sama doesn't exist. It's fine as long as there are only results. I won't interrupt the conversation anymore. I only wish for victory." (Eleonora)

She knew that a hand propped up her shoulder. *It's my husband.* Eleonora surrendered herself to that hand and happily thought about being able to gently sit on the chair.

"It's wrong if Paulina... that kid doesn't suffer more. That kid's sin is consistent with the empire's sin. Though she doesn't know anything... how much I suffered or how much I mourned, she isn't aware of any of that... and yet, because of such wind ((of change))... it's no good if she isn't in distress." (Eleonora)

There was a scenery Eleonora recalled in her brain. There was a sound she could hear.

It's a memory of her having played with the very young Paulina. Eleonora didn't hate that youngest princess who was like a stuffed doll that always lived as simpleton. Rather, it was a good relationship. Paulina didn't talk back to her, unlike her younger sister right after her. She was comfortable around her, since Paulina listened to her obediently no matter what story it was. Eleonora made her listen to many stories. There were a lot of things she wanted to talk about. A lot of it was reminiscent talk

about the hero.

However, that wasn't Paulina's attitude towards only Eleonora. She was a child who listened properly to anyone's talking. Talk of her father the king, stories of the other younger sister, even the chatting of the maids, she listened obediently to all of them. That doesn't mean that she ignored them. She listened to them while silently concentrating on what they said. Without interrupting with her own opinion, she was apparently absorbing the content she was told, just like that.

That's why Eleonora wanted to try hearing it. Paulina's story. Her thoughts. Trying to look for someone like a judge in that child, who heard the talk of even those who had a different opinion than that of Eleonora, Eleonora decided to ratify her own righteousness. It was only natural. That's because the one who talked the most with Paulina was Eleonora.

However, when she went to listen to Paulina, the answer was completely different from what she had expected.

"The people aren't disgusting. They are just living their lives."

"Even if there are differences in what they wear, people are people. They eat and sleep. It's the same."

"There isn't anything like a good war. War is war. Certainly it's no more than that."

Although Eleonora only reacted by saying "that's not true" and "you don't understand" even after listening, Paulina didn't correct the statement of her own opinion. And, Eleonora ended up hearing it. That question. The only one she couldn't approve of or wish for, that question.

"The hero as well as the evil man, undoubtedly they are identical, people. There's no good or bad. Only, the side who killed the hero is the empire and the side who killed the evil man is the kingdom. However, if you ask which of them is important, it's the evil man. After all, if the evil man didn't exist, I wouldn't have been born. I wouldn't be able to eat delicious food." (Paulina)

It wasn't something she could forgive.

And at the same time she was scared.

Paulina doesn't believe in everything of what Eleonora believes. Due to not believing, she is all the more resolute. Paulina is strong. Eleonora couldn't understand that. She felt that she would break if she came to comprehend it. That's why she doesn't try to understand... she does no more than to reject it. It's for the sake of her staying herself.

"Yes... it's no good. If that kid doesn't suffer, it will be painful for me. Therefore I will think about the method. Currently I got a bit worn-out, but... I will definitely ponder about it. A method where that child will suffer and become unable to live..." (Eleonora)

Her field of vision was gloomy. There was only something warm on her back. Being comforted by its body temperature, Eleonora slipped into the world of dreams. That was something very comfortable. Making sure to be covered, she fell into the darkness. At the last moment she felt like she heard someone's voice. Since it was a cold voice, she decided to treat it as her imagination, and to forget about it. It said the following:

"At such point, huh? Please take care of the rest. Sorry for troubling you." (Joakim)

Eleonora forgot those words.

Chapter 36

Towards something ahead of my conquest

A riverboat slowly drifted on the water's surface.

The atmosphere, which hasn't been illuminated by the sunlight for long, has grown cold steeply. Even the sound of the water crashing against the ship's bow, carries a somewhat mysterious feeling. The ripples on the perfectly clear water's surface are quite moderate as well. Its transparent-blue surface only reflects the pure-blue sky.

"Good morning."

Towards whom, or what, is the girl who is standing on the deck greeting? While emitting a small white breath with a "hah hah," she quietly stood still as she gazed ahead of the river's current. Her face, which is turned towards the west, doesn't show any joy or grief. Her cheeks are slightly red, and her immaturity shines through. There was her softness, too.

Paulina.

The third princess of the Asuria Kingdom was alive on this autumn morning of her 12th year.

"Paulina-sama, don't you feel cold?"

The woman, who appeared as if chasing after Paulina, called out to her worriedly. It's Wilma, Paulina's maid officer. Her blonde hair is reflecting the morning sun with a glitter. What she is holding in her hands is a warm-looking shawl. Paulina refused that by shaking her head. It's because she felt that the chilliness touching her skin is something pure.

"What's wrong?" (Paulina)

"Eh? No, I just want to cover you with this if you seem to be cold..." (Wilma)

"What are you afraid of?" (Wilma)

Wilma was startled. Because of her sudden motion, the thin sword at her waist made a metallic sound. Due to that clattering noise being awfully awkward, Paulina thought that she heard the helplessness of swaying on the water's surface. Wilma made her mouth flap open and closed several times, and after displaying indecision about what to do, she started to talk once she exhaled a white, long breath.

"As usual you have me surprised, Paulina-sama. It's just me feeling ashamed of my inexperience..." (Wilma)

Paulina listened to Wilma expressing her mind while bathing in the moist wind.

It appeared that Wilma was afraid of fate starting to move. *The tedious days in the royal villa have suddenly changed into something exciting since this year's spring, and there are no signs that we will return there from now on either. The northern remote area, where we went to under a tranquil sky while being shaken in a carriage... a small incident and a big encounter awaited us there.* Wilma voiced out fate's name.

Marko of Kikomaru.

At the time she pronounced that name, a slight tremble was mixed into the tone of Wilma's voice. *It is just the usual. It's a story she talked about countless times in this last half year.*

It's about Marko.

His terrifying appearance, accompanied by demons under the moonlight. A dreadfulness, where slaughter lurks, hidden on the other side of his smile.

For her, that spectacle was apparently etched into her very soul as something that she can't forget even if she wants to. Her fear might be promoted all the more by her possessing a mind and body which were diligently forged in martial arts, Paulina judges. For someone who knows the methods of cooking it's something like having one's heart touched by coming across an exquisite dish.

He and Paulina are tied by a single promise.

"I shall offer the crown to you, Your Highness Princess Paulina." (Marko)

It was a voice that gave the impression of a great mountain's serenity.

“There were some who tried to murder you here tonight. You don’t have to consider me having prevented that as an achievement. The reason for that is because of the possibility of me tolerating your death depending on the circumstances. I tested you. I will be frank about that first of all. I’m telling you this as fact and not as an apology. I’m repeating myself, but you were tested by me. Are you angry about that?” (Marko)

That was a confirmation and not a question. Because Paulina comprehended that, she simply shook her head. Because Marko comprehended that as well, he simply nodded his head. *It was probably for the sake of making the surroundings hear the exchanged words*, Paulina thinks.

“The continent is about to be plunged into war once again. It might become something like historical picture scrolls experienced in reality. It will result in the people looking, with impoverished expressions, towards the northern Heaven’s Boundary Mountain Range, distinguished war services, wearing the flesh and blood of soldiers and officers, coming and going, and battle flags, hovering above the Plain of Wandering Calamity. I dare say that this time, be it the kingdom or the empire, neither will taste the stimulation of a prosperous country or the despair of a ruined country. It will be just the people who are going to die. Such a war is approaching. It’s already upon us... even by tomorrow.” (Marko)

It was a prediction. *At the time when they talk about the future, people will blend in their wishes, for better or worse, in their words. If they associate the future with hope, the near future is promising, and if they associate it with despair, the near future is gloomy and stagnating.* However, she couldn’t feel any kind of wish within Marko’s words. Paulina was reminded of a noodles dough which was neglected even after kneading it well. *It was dried out. As it’s only natural that it will get dry if it was handled like this, there’s no other choice but to simply accept it as fact... such was his way of talking*, Paulina recalls.

“I have come to the conclusion that I will destroy that.”

Without protecting against it or preventing it, without resisting it or fighting against it, that black-haired, blue-eyed person declared it’s destruction. What’s “it”? What does he mean by destroying it? Paulina accepted that something to be “history.” It’s about the history of man.

That person, who tries to walk a distant path by himself, while not finishing to explain everything and without any indication that he will talk about the details, didn’t show

even a fragment of emotions, but nonetheless he emitted his zeal to his surroundings. Paulina sensed that passion. A large mountain with an air of composure towards the outside, albeit hiding terrific lava inside... it possesses a colossal flame with a heat to the degree of making the world shake.

He is beautiful. Paulina felt that he is lovely. Controlling the divergence between inside and outside by himself, without the slightest fluctuation, his figure, which faces the world while emitting heat, seemed to be brilliant. By obtaining fire, people were able to obtain various meals. He was fire. With him being alive, the world will probably be able to obtain a lot. Paulina was aware that she once again had gotten a prediction.

"I think I will offer you the crown for that reason, Your Highness Princess Paulina."
(Marko)

Due to the great mountain rumbling weakly and faintly releasing its heat, resolutions were urged onto Paulina who saw that. There were two resolutions. The resolution to accept the fire called Marko, and the resolution to release that fire into the world. Paulina and him weren't unrelated anymore. She understood that. *The fact of our meeting is irreversible. I can't return to the situation before I met him anymore. There's no other choice but acceptance or rejection.*

"Do you like refined noodles?" (Paulina)

That was an act of touching destiny with her fingertips. It's not like Paulina wanted to confirm something. She just wanted to touch him. She wished for the sensation of that destiny being in front of her at a meeting that had never occurred once in her life until now.

"I came to like it. I haven't hated them to begin with, but the noodles, kneaded by you, were something splendid." (Marko)

"What do you like about them?" (Paulina)

"It's the feeling of the noodles going down the throat. There are various ways of eating them, but the quality of the noodles influences everything with refined noodles after all. If the noodles are great, their flavour will be deep, no matter how they are eaten. If the noodles are bad, you won't be able to savour them, no matter how you eat them."
(Marko)

"Yea. Man's history is the same." (Paulina)

“Yes, just as you say. It’s identical.” (Marko)

Paulina smiled and Marko smiled once again as well. It was a fantastic sensation. Paulina enjoyed it, too. A serene melody resounded in her body and mind. *I will predict the colours of the world for those who resolved themselves and infer their destiny. It was great.*

“What shall I do?” (Paulina)

“Please stay healthy forever. I exist for that reason.” (Marko)

“Will you eat the refined noodles I make?” (Paulina)

“That’s something I wish for.” (Marko)

“And the continuation of the “beast” story?” (Paulina)

“My continuation will eventually... as for your continuation, I will listen to it anytime.” (Marko)

The refreshing sounds continue. Paulina was happy about her own fate having started to move. *Within me a fire had been lit and I knew that it would become my energy. And then I noticed that I was bored. Completely like a person who ate sufficiently for the first time, just like finally realizing the truth I thirsted for.*

And Paulina and Marko made an agreement. Marko will offer the crown to Paulina, and Paulina will release Marko into the world. The two, who chose and were chosen, follow their destiny while facing their future as a result of that.

Marko for the sake of breaking his own prediction.

Paulina for the sake of welcoming her own prediction.

History exposed its gigantic shape in front of him and her. However, it also seemed as if it was waiting to be tread down by their feet. *Once I look back, there’s already a path hardened by treading. Once I look up, his feet are certainly stepping firmly down and he is preparing the next step.* Paulina felt good by that encouragement.

“...The military gains of the Royal Guard Unit are outside common sense.” (Wilma)

Wilma's talk continues. Being wrapped up by the tranquil atmosphere of the greeting morning while advancing on the river, even the time for breakfast hasn't arrived yet. Paulina loved this time, too.

"Even though his surroundings admire him, they refer to his good luck. Many coincidences caused that unbelievable military achievement by supporting them. There are also many who regard the White Dragon Banner as a flag of fortune. I hear there are even people possessing white dish cloths as a charm for their first campaign. That's the way it has been taken." (Wilma)

"However", Wilma said while looking somewhat bitter.

"I'm in a position closer to the truth than them. That boy... the man called Marko isn't a person accomplishing things by relying on coincidences. The Royal Guard Unit's military results are something obtained as if following the natural course of acquiring them without a chance for doubt. I don't grasp the method fully, but even so, I can declare that. His existence itself seems to be outside of common sense... that is, for me..." (Wilma)

It was a quiet, inaudible comment with a sigh mixed in. Paulina heard only that. The splashing sound of water leapt up. With that as a start, people started to do their morning activities. The sailors increase their motions, hasten them, and their sounds exceed those of the water and the wind. Life on the water begins.

"Marco is scary, isn't he?" (Paulina)

Paulina's words apparently made Wilma surprised once again. She realizes that she's gripping the shawl to a degree that it becomes creased. *I will put my hand on her hand.* Both were cold.

"Marko certainly knows that. That's why he's always hiding. He is gentle." (Paulina)

The place where hand touched hand started to produce warmth unbeknownst from which it originated. In order to nurture that, Paulina shook her hand slightly.

"It's fine even if you are nervous. But being frightened is no good. You can eat a soup no matter how hot it is. And it will certainly be delicious, won't it? If you remember the anticipation of what kind of dish is on the other side of the steam, blowing on it becomes something pleasant." (Paulina)

The warmth softens Wilma's stiffness. Paulina considered that touch as precious.

"A dish placed in front of you is, fate. Once you face it, you can eat it. The things you ate before, and the things you wanted to eat someday are important, aren't they? The things you can eat now are valuable." (Paulina)

Once she finished saying that, it's Paulina whose stomach rumbled as result. The time for breakfast was approaching. The twinkling reflected on the water's surface increases her cheerfulness. She guesses the taste of the grilled fish by the fragrance that suddenly started to hang in the air.

"Your stomach is as punctual as ever, Paulina-sama." (Wilma)

"Yea, it functions dependably." (Paulina)

Wilma recovered her smile. Just like the water's surface, her bewitching blonde hair also increased its light. Paulina enjoyed its brilliance. It was something she liked about Wilma with all her heart.

"I look forward to breakfast." (Wilma)

"Yea, it will be fish. My mouth's already preparing for it." (Paulina)

"Do you look forward to meeting with... Marko as well?" (Wilma)

"Yea. My feet are aching now." (Paulina)

Once Paulina displayed herself stepping on the spot, Wilma smiled even more. After bringing along large quantities of first-class, light wheat flour, Paulina intends this time to refine the noodles even more by kneading than last time. She was relieved because she would stay there for quite a bit. She planned to enjoy various flavours and to make others enjoy various tastes.

"It will be enjoyable." (Paulina)

After Wilma's hand became very warm, Paulina, who felt great as well, tried to massage her. She intensely massaged the hand, which stays without escaping even though it's ticklish, resulting in Paulina getting engrossed in it before she notices. Unable to stand it any longer, Wilma burst into laughter. Paulina was happy.

“Hurry up, it seems we have to get the preparation in order soon. Let’s go.”

Before descending towards the cabin while being guided, Paulina once more threw her gaze ahead of the river’s stream, ahead of the ship’s advance. A bright path, which sparkles behind the rising sun, continues into the far, far distance. Regardless of what Paulina desires and wishes for, everything proceeds as it is. Forward. And beyond that. History doesn’t know of coming to a stop.

“It’s pretty.”

Those were words which weren’t heard by anyone. Certainly no one has heard them. However Paulina thought that she heard an answer. It’s the answer of the person who is slightly further down the path from here. There was only one person who came to her mind.

Because Wilma opened the door, Paulina was lured by the already concrete aroma. There was something gushing forth inside her mouth. Paulina climbs down with a spirited pace. *Going downstream in a boat in the morning will be especially delicious,* Paulina thinks.

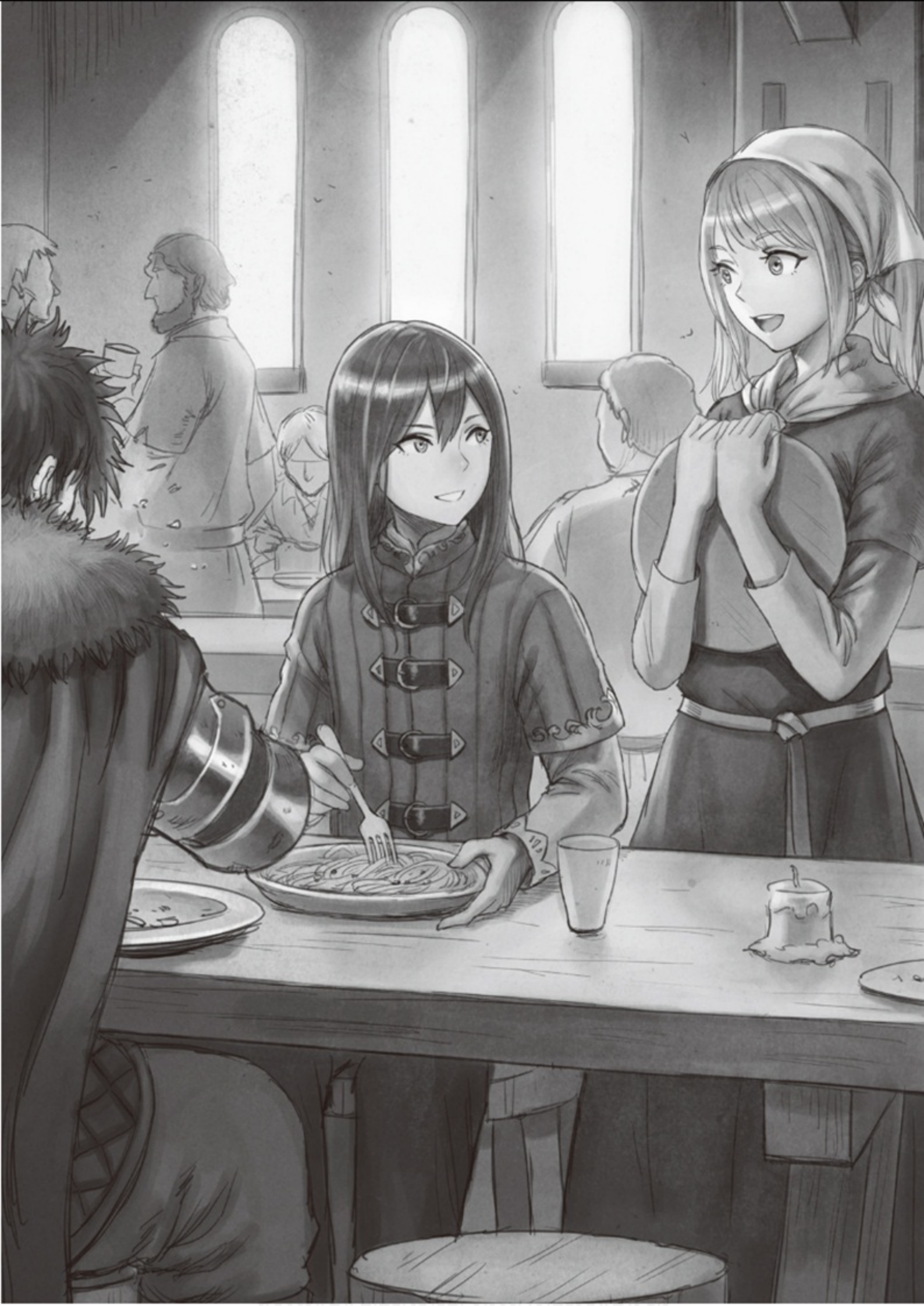
The boat moves.

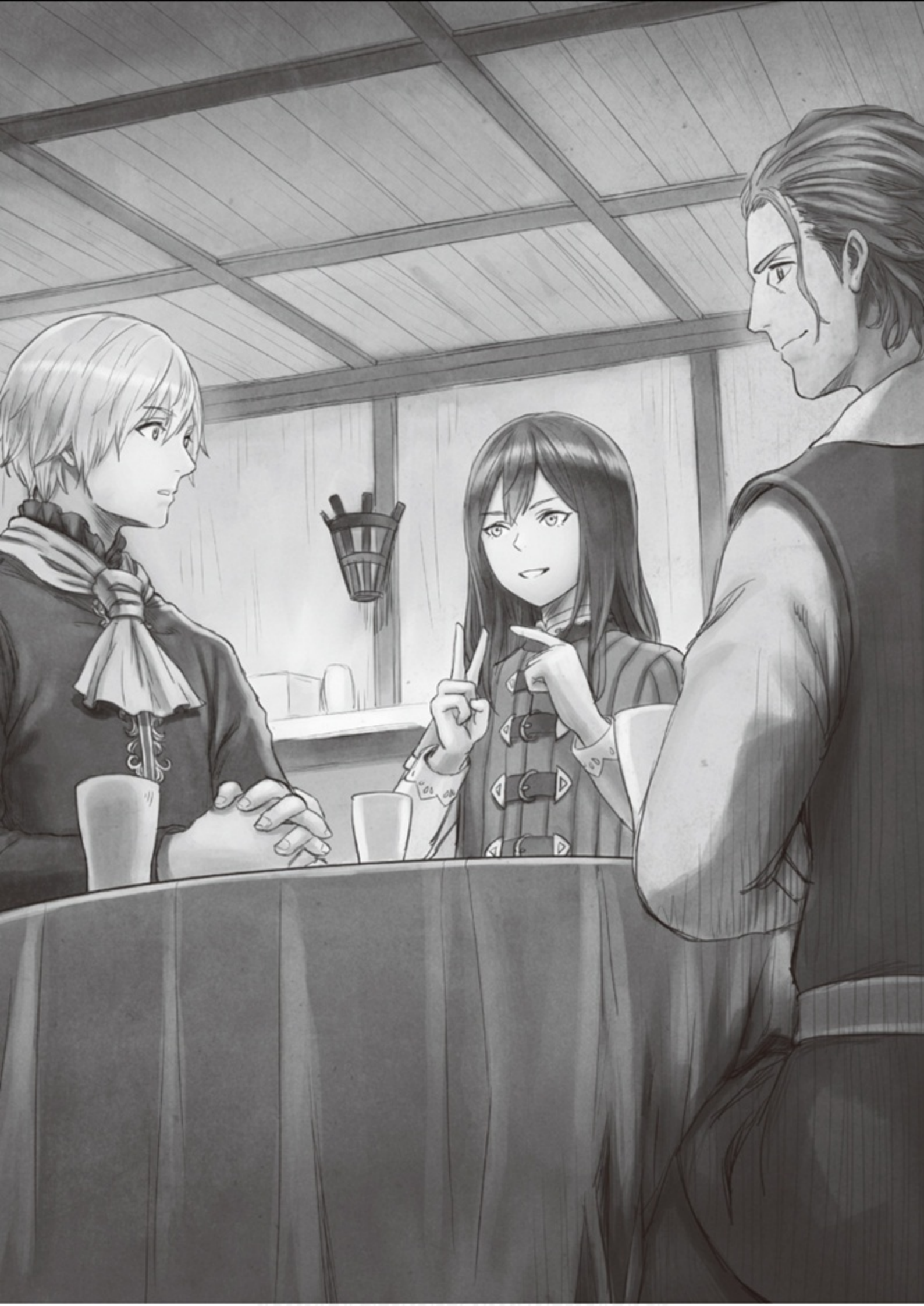
The reunion between Paulina and the Royal Guard Unit was actually realized after half a year.









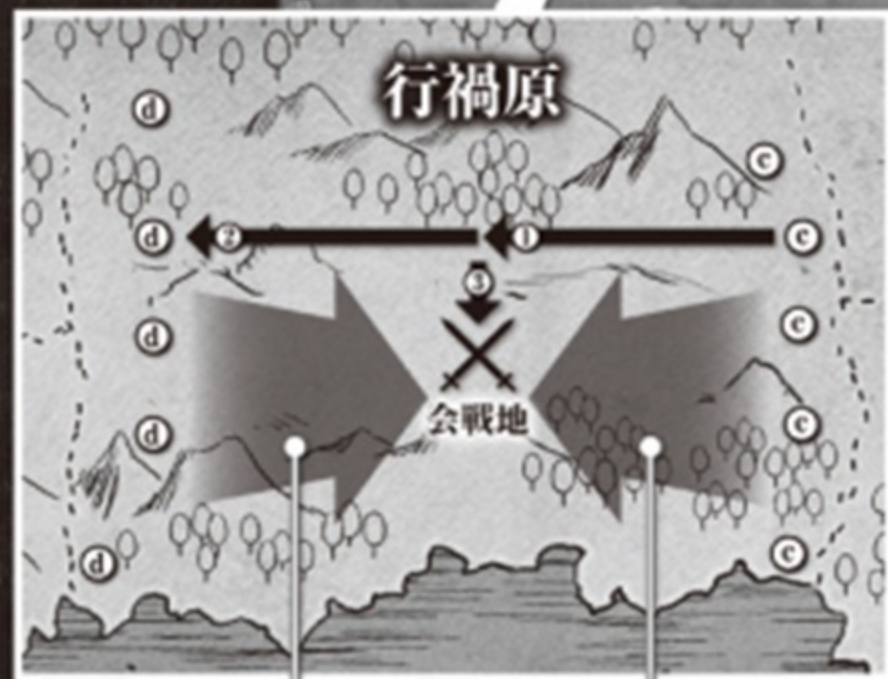
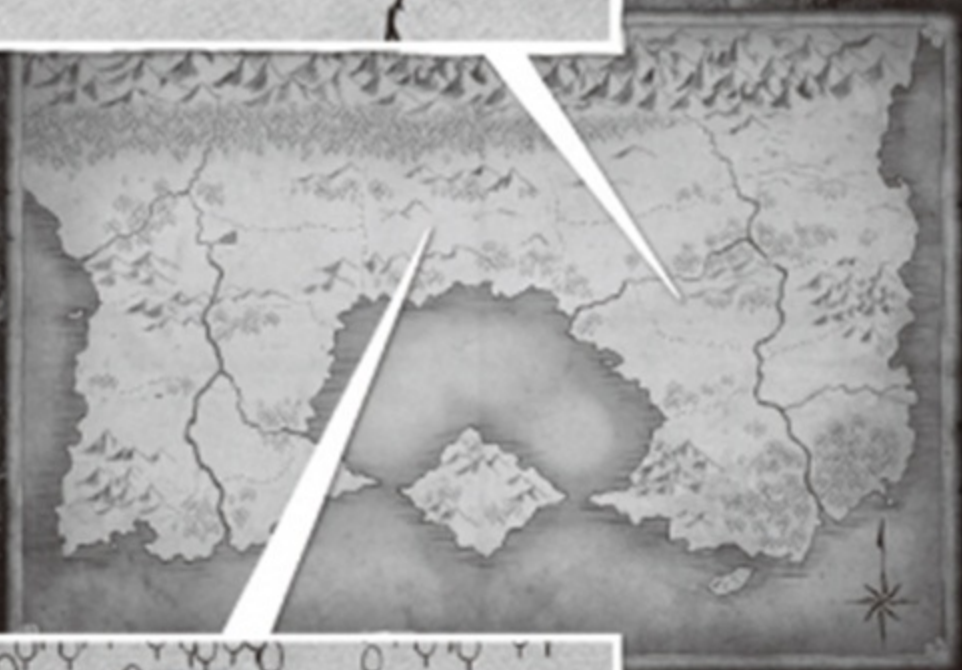


舞臺地圖

Kuuki Senki Stage Map



- ① チトガ大町
- ② パウリーナ親衛団駐屯地



- ③ 王国軍前線砦
- ④ 帝国軍前線砦

▶ パウリーナ親衛団の動き

- ① 全軍
- ② 軽騎兵・工作兵
(オイヴァ、マルコ、クスター)
- ③ 重騎兵・歩兵
(アクセリ、ヤルッコ)

会戦前段階の両軍の主な動き



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